

Prodigal Son

by commandocucumber

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Summary: Eight years after Berk's heir vanished, the Viking town is slowly crumbling. Dragon attacks are more devastating than ever. To save her village Astrid must piece together exactly what happened before the dragons wipe them all out for good. Meanwhile, half a world away and eight years wiser, Hiccup decides it might just be time to go home.

1. Chapter 1

Prodigal Son 1

Astrid stared at the recruits assembled in the training arena. Numbering two dozen in total, they were the next generation of warrior. Not so long ago, she had stood in the ring herself, poised to receive the same training. She saw in their young faces the same anxiousness, fear, and determination she had felt during that first day.

The arena itself had looked different then. Back then the walls of the arena had been hard, heavy and flat, solid and reassuring. Now they were pock-marked and blackened with soot. Craters and crevices marked where dragonfire had heated and split the granite. The iron net which covered the roof, before a sign of Viking dominance over the beasts, was twisted and melted. Welds had cracked, and though it was still heavy enough and solid enough to keep Nadders and Gronckles contained, Astrid didn't dare unleash a Monstrous nightmare into the arena. She had been forced to kill the last one, a sad day for dragon training, but it was that or watch it destroy the arena and escape into the streets of Berk. In his smithy, Gobber the Belch tried his best to keep up with the demands of the island, but without his assistant, he was swamped. There was no time for repairs anymore and no manpower regardless. Above the cage, the sky was grey and cloudy. Mist hung in the air around them, soaking their clothes. In a few minutes the morning chill would set in. She had to get her trainees

moving.

The young Vikings waited patiently, their eyes flitting between her and the enormous barricaded wooden doors behind which, they knew, their enemies waited.

"Not today." She said, ignoring their sighs of disappointment. "Not until I think you can handle it. Anyone remember what happened to Slug-Lout?"

They did. Everyone in the village did. Snot-Lout's youngest cousin had been caught by the Nadder during the stealth and agility maze. Instead of staying in its blindspot, the little one had panicked and run. The Nadder had chased him. Gobber had tried, but with his wooden leg, he couldn't reach them in time. That was the day Gobber retired from Dragon Training. No one blamed him, of course. Getting wounded or killed was a part of Viking life. It was an occupational hazard. Besides, his workload at the forge was more than he could handle as it was. Yet what little light was left in the man's gentle eyes had been extinguished that day, and Astrid had stepped up to the plate. No one could deny her qualifications, and everyone else was too busy. Yet Berk desperately needed new warriors.

As a fun warm-up, she set her trainees into pairs. Armed with wooden swords they danced around one another, thrusting, dodging, blocking and parrying the way she had taught them. She moved from pair to pair, commenting and correcting mistakes as she saw them.

After that came the running. The young ones circled, lap after lap around the arena's perimeter while she set up barrels and crude wooden walls, creating an obstacle course for them. Then there were push-ups, sit-ups, stretches, and at long last, aching tired and sore, they were allowed to enter her arena, and start the training itself.

Astrid did not use a real dragon to train them. She wasn't going to. Not until she was certain they could handle it. She did not want a repeat of what happened to Slug-Lout. They had to be physically capable and mentally strong enough to handle facing one of the fire-breathing demons. Instead she had a carved wooden dragon's head mounted on the end of a pole. She taught them how to approach, putting herself at the center of her carefully arranged obstacles, and making them approach from the circle's edge. Every time the false head swung in their direction, they were to duck down and remain motionless while the others snuck up from behind. If she spotted one of them, she'd yell 'fire!' and that recruit would be consigned to more running, more jumping, more sparring. More activities to hone his body and sharpen his wits before he was allowed back in the circle. In the meantime his surviving companions would continue to sneak forwards, slowly getting closer to their goal: the 'dragon head' which Astrid carried with her.

It was a good exercise, Astrid felt. She had invented it herself. It taught teamwork and stealth. It taught them when to move, and when to stay down. It taught them how to look, and how to move without being seen, and she was not going to present them with a real dragon until the group as a whole could consistently make it to the dragon's head without losing a man.

After the game, they practiced with bows and slingshots, using

seagulls as targets. The fisherman regularly caught the birds down at the docks, and there was a seemingly endless supply of them. Enough, in fact, that they were eaten in Berk on a regular basis. If they could hit a gull, they could certainly hit a dragon.

The sun reached its apex, and Astrid knew her recruits were hungry. Hefting their weapons and equipment on their backs, she jogged them out of the arena, and through the streets of Berk, leading them on a winding path up and down the slopes of the city. All around them, the sounds of hammering and sawing could be heard. Vikings were perched on the tops of almost every building, trying to finish repairs from the last attack before the afternoon rains set in.

At long last, they arrived at the patched and charred Great Hall, standing proudly despite its blemishes. Inside, she knew Iona the cook would be preparing an enormous meal for them. It was part of the training regimen she had arranged with Stoick the Vast. Astrid had stressed the need to keep her recruits well fed and well watered, so that they could grow healthy and strong in preparation for their future as defenders of Berk.

Her severity was the trademark of her training; Astrid never gave her recruits anything. Every reward, including food, was earned. To that end, she split them into pairs once again. Those who won ate first. However those who hurt each other or neglected safety and control, ate last. Those who lied, tricked their way through the sparring session, or claimed they'd hit when they hadn't, didn't eat at all. A few of the children had tried that at the start, but with her sharp eyes, Astrid always caught them. They were fast learners.

"These are your battle brothers." She would say, "You live with them. You eat with them. You fight with them and you die with them. If you're willing to trick them, you don't deserve to be among them."

She led her band inside in strict, orderly lines. They each thanked Iona in turn, as Astrid had taught them. The Viking cook acknowledged them and stepped back from the pot boiling over the central firepit. Wooden bowls and spoons were distributed to each of them. Astrid doled out the meals herself, quizzing each hungry child on dragon lore as she served their food.

"How many shots does a Gronckle have?"

"Where is the Nadder's blindspot?"

"How do you spot a changewing?"

"How many heads does a zippleback have, and which one should you chop off first?"

"What is the first move you should make when fighting a Monstrous Nightmare?"

If the children answered incorrectly, they were to retake position at the end of the line.

"You have to know this." Astrid declared as she did every day. "You have to live and breathe these facts. They have to be at the front of your mind. During battle you don't have time to think you have to act

on instinct and these facts will save your life! These facts will save Berk!"

The Book of Dragons was read from during the meal. Astrid flipped through it at random, sometimes throwing out more trivia, at other times reading entire passages. The meal ended and she set the book down, allowing her pupils an hour of respite to let the food settle. They slouched against walls, or lay on benches, resting their sore muscles and full bellies.

The eight-year-old Osmand, youngest of the children, grabbed the book and flipped through it himself. Astrid sipped from her stew, watching as he sat nearby, absorbed in the dry, cracked, and yellowing pages. He flipped from entry to entry, starting at the Terrible Terror, and reading through the book. He skimmed past the Monstrous Nightmare and the Gronckle. He paused and shivered at the Whispering Death, flipped past the Zippleback, Snaptrapper, Deadly Nadder, and Timberjack. He paused again, reading the entries for the Scauldrons and Thunderdrums. The pages flipped by; Changewing, Boneknapper, and Skrill. At last he reached the entry on the Night Fury.

Osmand read the short passage with a keen eye. He looked up at her, his eyes flickering in the firelight. "Miss Hofferson, what do you know about the Night Fury?"

"There hasn't been a Night Fury attack on Berk since before you were born." Astrid said severely. "Your father's a fisherman. You should read about the Scauldrons and Thunderdrums he has to fight off on every voyage. One day you'll join him out there."

"But what do you know about them?"

"No one knows anything!" she replied curtly. She began to recite the passage. She didn't need to read the book. She hadn't touched it in ten years. There was no need when every passage was memorized.

"Speed: Unknown. Size: Unknown." She leaned forward, taking a small amount of pleasure in the way the boy's eyes widened in fear. "The Night Fury is the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Never ever engage this Dragon. Your only chance: hide and pray to Odin it does not find you."

"Also it doesn't like Eels." The boy said, glancing down at the Book.

Astrid stared. "What?"

"Eels." Osmand repeated. "It doesn't like them. I don't either. Eels are gross."

Astrid straightened up, frowning. "Where does it say that?"

"Right here." Osmand pointed into the book. He flipped the page over and grinned in surprise. "Hey! There's a picture!"

"Give me that!" Astrid snapped, springing across the table to yank the book out of the young boy's eager hands.

There was indeed a picture. A view of the dragon from above, with the wings spread. The drawing was crude, yet detailed enough to show that the artist had gotten quite close to the creature. She recognized the

broad, gentle brushstrokes of course. There had been a time in Berk's past when the forge was covered in technical drawings with those same broad strokes.

"Tyr's missing hand!" she exclaimed quietly.

Osmand was giggling. "Someone wrote in the Dragon Manual!"

"Quiet!" She hissed sharply. The boy's mouth clamped shut and his eyes filled with worry.

"You mustn't mention this to anyone!" she said, "Go lay down with the other children and don't tell them either, okay? It's our secret. Just between you and me."

"But who drew it?"

Astrid took a deep breath and stared down at the drawing. Her fingers traced the gentle lines and careful details. It had been a very long time since she had thought about him. Longer still since the last signs of his presence had disappeared from Berk's day-to-day life. Drawings could still be found, untouched in the back room of Gobber's smithy. Rumor had it that the tiny bed in the upstairs room of the Haddock Hall was still there, along with all the books and papers, gathering dust. The bed was unmade. Paper, charcoal and quills lay strewn across the desk; half-finished technical plans and lines of careful poetry, all caught in a moment which would never have another.

Astrid said, "Berk's Lost Heir."

* * *

><p>Hello everyone. My name is Commandocucumber. I'm delving into new territory here. I want to work on something which will hopefully be a little lighter in tone. HTTYD is a guilty pleasure of mine, and thought I'd take a crack at a fic. I'm not sure how far this'll go. Perhaps it'll depend on the response I get from all of you.

Yes, it's another Hiccup Ran Away fic. Like there aren't enough of these, but between Hitchups and the Becoming trilogy this type of fic has really shown its potential for an effective and affecting storyline. I can't say I'll be staying as close to the reality of Viking life as Midoriko-Sama, but I'm also going to try and avoid the mysticism and scope creep which appeared in Hitchups. Btw if you haven't read Hitchups, or the Becoming trilogy, you're missing out on two of the best fics in this fandom.

I want to find that middleground which the movies and TV show portrayed. The 'Berk' Viking way of life, as it were, and perhaps explore a few of Hiccup's adventures on the side. That being said, expect a slightly harder edge than shown in the movies or the TV series.

I know I'm new here. It's always a little nervewracking, breaking into a new fandom, but in writing when you've got the itch, you've got the itch!

2. Chapter 2

Prodigal Son 2

The markets were always open in the port city of Eskendereyya. Apart from being a cultural, scientific, and economic touchstone of the ancient world, Eskendereyya was a crossroads. It was a point of travel between the east and the west, between north and south. It was a melting pot of cultures and values. Travelers of every religious affiliation, geographical location, and skin color ended up there, and with them they brought the goods and culture of their homelands. Silk and spices were shipped from the Far East along with perfumes and incense. Wheat and maize from some far-away nations, rice from others. Expensive fabrics, exotic animals, anything and everything could be found in Eskendereyya.

The city never slept. Thankfully for Ali Murat Yahya Attar, it always ate. He was a grocer, specializing in fish and fruit. He owned a series of shops along the waterfront. Ali was a good businessman. He planned well financially, and had significant amounts of money. Some of it was stashed away, and some he had reinvested in the fishing vessels he relied upon to bring him his goods. Of late, the costs of fishing in the Mediterranean had skyrocketed. More and more protection was needed to fight off the Moorish Pirates which roamed the area. Yet Ali kept his business running. His shops were efficient places. They stood out from the crowd for the variety and quality of their goods, and the friendliness of their service.

Even so, he was vulnerable to theft. Not only on the high seas, but on land as well, in the city itself. Every so often the street kids would come by and grab a fruit off the stands. The City's guards did what they could, but nothing could prevent the evolution of the street urchins which roamed the alleyways and marketplaces of Eskendereyya. It was a part of life, and he factored the costs into his overhead, expecting some level of theft.

Over the past few months, however, entire baskets of fish had been vanishing, as his sons and employees reported. Not just vanishing, but flying straight into the open sky at high speed. Zipping upwards as if caught on some cosmic fishing line. It only happened when the nights were cloudy, as tonight was. The lights from the city tended to drown out the stars, something he wasn't particularly fond of. In his desert homeland he had used them to navigate, but here he felt cut off from nature, and on a more practical level, he couldn't see whatever sky-bound demon kept stealing his fish!

Ali had bought himself a crossbow, and stood at the ready by his market stall. Beside him his son and a hired guard were tending to the street-level business, haggling with passersby and regular customers over prices and quantities. Ali was quite proud of his sons. They were growing up to be fine businessmen themselves.

A gust of wind blew down upon his hooded head. The sand swirled under his feet. The demon was above him! Ali pointed his crossbow skywards, searching the inky blackness for whatever thieving devil had decided to steal from his stall. Both his son and the guard hesitated, watching him carefully, but he waved them away. They turned their attention back to the crowd of customers and the bustling street beyond.

Ali's sharp eyes caught movement in the skies above. He sighted down the bolt and fired the crossbow. The projectile whistled upwards and vanished, though there was a muffled and satisfying yelp of surprise, and something swearing inæ€| Danish? Demons spoke Danish? Since when did demons speak Danish?

Something caught in the back of his belt and he screeched in surprise as he was swept upwards into the air. He could see the stunned, rapidly shrinking faces of his son, the guard, and bemused members of the street crowd. His crossbow, devoid of its bolt, fell from his grasp only to clatter down on some wine caskets. As he rose further he could see the entire street, bathed in yellow torchlight. For a moment he had a view of Eskendereyya which few in the living realm ever experienced. He could see above his stall, and over the buildings. The entire city, in fact, was lit up with hues of purple and dark blue, stretched across the nighttime coastline each street a strand in a giant glowing spiderweb. In the harbor he could see the lanterns of hundreds of fishing vessels. People below scurried like ants from stall to stall. In a matter of seconds the world had grown so immensely, and his stall had shrunk so much...

Suddenly he was dropped. Flailing wildly and screaming for his life he plummeted, watching his stall rising to meet him. He hit the thick cloth covering which protected his fruit stand from the sunlight. It sagged in the center and then ripped open, depositing him onto a pile of mangoes. From there he rolled onto the ground and landed on his bum, the wind knocked out of him with a huff. Hair tousled and eyes wide with shock, he stared straight ahead, ignoring the laughter of the crowd around him. Ali was too busy trying to piece together the previous four seconds.

Beside his stall, unnoticed by the laughing crowds or the bewildered shopkeeper, a small grappling hook was lowered at an even pace. The hooks found purchase in the arching handle of a fish basket, and it was promptly pulled upwards into the midnight sky.

* * *

><p>On the roof of the library of Eskendereyya, greatest library of the ancient world, a dragon landed. This was an unusual occurrence. In point of fact it was probably the first time it had ever happened. The creatures were not native to that part of the world. They had only recently been discovered in the furthest, most northern reaches of the settled world. Word had not even reached Eskendereyya that they existed.</p>

The event was made even stranger by the breed of dragon. Called a Night Fury by the Danes, the only peoples to have encountered them, the sleek, black creature looked almost demonic with its slitted green eyes and wide, fanged mouth.

What was more, it carried a rider on its back. A tall, lanky figure in leather armor and full face helmet. They landed with hardly a whisper, sliding smoothly to a halt despite the rather large basket of fish which was dangling from one of the many saddle hooks. The rider swung his leg over the dragon's side and slid down a few inches to reach the ground. Dismounting had become so much easier in the past few years.

He pulled off his helmet and shook out his shaggy auburn mane. He

brushed it out of his own sharp green eyes and sighed. "Well, bud, I think we're going to have to pick a different stall next time. That guy had a crossbow. That was way too close."

Behind him, the dragon scabbled around in a tight circle, straining to get at the basket hanging just behind its head.

"Toothless!" The rider turned and grabbed his dragon, calming the animal enough to remove the stinking sack. The grappling hook was still tangled in the handles, and it took the rider a moment to clear it. The dragon bounded forwards and dove greedily into the pile of raw fish.

"You are just the worst kind of slob, you know that?" The rider said fondly as he coiled the thin line. He followed it back to its source; an ornate shield mounted on the other side of the occupied dragon's saddle. He gave the string a gentle tug and watched as the internal springs pulled the line back in, coiled within the shield itself, ready to be shot out again at a moment's notice.

The shield was his prized possession. Its design was quite complex. He had built the device himself. He had planned, drawn and crafted the intricate parts using the molding techniques of Andalusian jewelry smiths. The technology of springs and gears he had taken from clockmakers as far east as Byzantium. The outer shell had been forged in Constantinople itself. Of course, the Rider had access to certain resources other smiths did not. There was a particular breed of dragon, he had discovered, which when fed a particular type of iron ore, vomited up an extremely light, extraordinarily durable type of iron.

For a time, the rider had made his living quietly selling it to smiths all over the Viking archipelago, but time, tide, and torch-bearing search parties had driven him further and further south, chased away by his attachment to the very creature which carried him. Their bond was a permanent one now, and the Rider wouldn't have it any other way. He had carried some of the iron with him, though. Normally he would never have considered himself to be a hoarder, but his gut had told him that it would come in handy, if only to make a last-minute dollar. Instead he had turned it into one of the most useful tools in his arsenal.

He frowned, looking back out at the yellow lights of the city. "I hope he's all right. Do you think I should pay him back or something?"

The dragon grunted noncommittally and shuffled forward on its midnight black paws. Its head was now almost fully submerged in the basket.

"I meanâ€¦ we are stealing, Toothless." The Rider said severely. He stared out across the city. "Those weren't our fish, and he had a right to defend his property."

His only reply was the satisfying gulping noise of the dragon's feed.

"All we did was scare him a little. And he did try to kill us."

The dragon licked its lips in satisfaction and wandered over to him.

It hovered at his shoulder, watching him with big, round eyes. The rider reached up and absentmindedly scratched its chin causing it to coo peacefully.

"You all full now, bud?"

It nuzzled his hand.

"Never mindâ€œ!" the rider said, turning away from the vista. He grinned at his companion. "No one could afford your appetite, Toothless. I think if you could find them, you'd eat every fish in the ocean."

The dragon snorted and wandered over to a scorched section of stone. For a moment, the library's roof was bathed in blue light as it reheated the burned surface. Then it curled up and settled in for a deep sleep. It gave the rider an inviting look, opening its wing to shelter him, yet he shook his head and retrieved his shield. "Not yet, bud- and don't give me that look! You always need your naps. I need my 'me time' too."

The dragon gave him a skeptical stare. Then it shook its head in defeat and curled itself up to sleep.

Hiccup paused a moment longer to make sure his friend was safe and warm, then he set off across the roof of the library. The library of Eskendereyya was among the largest in the world. Standing several stories tall, and several times the square footage of the Great Hall, it was an astounding and alluring sight for the intrepid young Viking. Within its walls was contained the knowledge and wisdom of a hundred cultures, the learning of a thousand scholars, and the words of a million poets. He wanted to read it all!

He had picked the roof as a nesting area almost immediately. It was a high point, easy to take off and land on. There was only one entrance, and the amount of dust build-up told Hiccup that no one had used the rickety ladder in a long, long time. His choice had only been solidified once he'd discovered what was inside the building.

He approached one of the three great domes which were placed at the center of each wing of the massive library. They each had their windows to let daylight in. They kept the windows open all the time, figuring no thieves would ever bother to break in anyway; it wasn't like many of them could actually read.

Fish baskets aside, Hiccup didn't consider himself a thief. Even though he was technically breaking into the building. He came to acquire knowledge, after all. Wasn't that what Libraries were for? Could knowledge be stolen? And if it could, was hoarding it really the right thing to do?

His gaze lingered on his sleeping friend.

Sometimes. He thought, _Depending on what was at stake._

Working in darkness, he wedged his shield against the frame of one of the windows and pulled out the grapple. He lowered it into the darkness below and then carefully eased himself over the window sill. He slid easily down the line and landed on the smoothly tiled floor

with a faint thump.

He stopped there, listening for any signs of the patrolling guards. Only silence greeted him, along with the strange white noise created by the wind whistling through the stone structure.

The Viking reached into a pocket and pulled out a small tin filled with a light blue gel. He had found out early on that Toothless' spit contained residue from the chemicals the dragon used to flame. He had collected the liquid while Toothless slept (the dragon always drooled when he slept), and boiled it down until all that was left was the flammable gelatin, which burned for ages! Far longer than any candles! It had taken him a month to collect this much, but it was looking to last him twice as long, if he used it sparingly.

Hiccup found an alcove between two of the shelves, and carefully lit the gel using a flint and steel striker. The blue flame blossomed outwards, giving him a small circle of light. He stood up, holding the candle in the palm of his hand and walking amongst the shelves, giving each book and carefully rolled scroll a close examination.

What was on the menu tonight?

Ah, yes. Homer's Iliad.

Hiccup had spent some time in Greece, and had learned to speak and read both languages, Greek and Latin. He found them relatively easy to pick up. Hiccup loved the Iliad. He could do without the grand battles and brave thuggish warriors constantly cutting each other to pieces. The dramatic fights between Hector and Achilles, he usually gave those a miss. He felt a lot of sympathy for Cassandra; cursed with knowing the truth, and knowing that no one would ever listen. And how could one battle last ten years? Obviously neither side was trying very hard. Maybe they knew they were fighting for a stupid cause, though every time he read the description of Helen of Troy, Hiccup's overactive imagination would always conjure a picture of Astrid Hofferson, clothed in white and standing at some Greco-Roman balcony, waiting for her beloved. The image made his heart ache.

But he loved Odysseus! The character was not only a capable warrior, but a brilliant thinker and respected for both of his strengths! Odysseus had won the battle in the end, finally getting Greeks inside the city. They owed their victory to him. And there was a whole other book devoted exclusively to him and his adventures afterwards! Hiccup couldn't wait to read it!

There, in the library of Eskendereyya half a world away from home, he settled down at a random table to read a good book.

* * *

><p>Eskendereyya is Arabic for Alexandria. I'm using the old term to put a little more distance between this story and reality.

Andalusia is an area of Spain.

**Moor was an old-world term for a particular type of Muslim invader.
**

Constantinople (now Istanbul) was the capital of the Byzantine Empire, a prominent force in the ancient world.

I'm not sure where exactly to place the archipelago of HTTYD in History's timeline (or on a map), but let's say its roughly eighth/ninth century. Maybe? I dunno. You know what attacked Alexandria in the ninth century? Motherfucking Pirates! This is gonna be fun! XD

And yes, I worked in the shield from the TV show. It always seemed so much more fitting for Hiccup than the flame sword. I'm not sure why they decided to cut it from the movie. It's a pretty awesome little gadget, and it showcases his ingenuity pretty well.

Let me know what you guys think. I want to make sure I've captured the Toothless/Hiccup relationship, so if you've got any commentary let me hear it while we're still close enough to do some major editing.

15/03/30 " Made minor editing changes.

3. Chapter 3

Prodigal Son 3

Lying on her mat, Astrid tossed and turned. She just could not seem to get comfortable. All around her she could hear her family stirring in their own ragged linens. She was keeping them up, she knew. It was a small home, too small for privacy. Astrid knew she needed sleep; tomorrow was another long day of training, but her racing mind kept her awake. She could not seem to get the Night Fury drawing out of her head.

Hiccup. The lad had been a twig. A runt. How had he managed to get closer to a Night Fury than any Viking before him? Was it all a ploy? A prank discovered nearly a decade too late? As she recalled, the boy had possessed a troublemaker's streak. Yet most of that had been accidental carnage. He had been a walking disaster, and not everyone in the town had been heartbroken when he had vanished. Gobber was hurt, naturally. Stoick himself seemed to close up completely. He barely spoke anymore except to make judgments and give orders. He had been that way for so long that by now most of the children thought it was simply his way. Yet Astrid was old enough to remember a time when he would laugh and drink with the rest of the village. Besides those two, more than a few locals had been rather fond of Hiccup, treating his frequent accidents with the same patience one would use to approach a precocious puppy which had just peed on a carpeted floor. They had kept faith that his Haddock blood would show through eventually, that his awkward incompetence was just a stage.

And Astrid herself? Well she hadn't really made anything of him at all. The boy had nurtured a hopeless crush on her, which she at first failed to recognize, then promptly ignored. He couldn't fight, couldn't alk (at least not to her), couldn't drink, and couldn't contribute. He had been nothing. Nothing at all until the last few months of his life.

Astrid rolled onto her side and shut her eyes, trying to remember the

training itself. At first he had been as ill-fitted to the warrior's role as everyone had expected. He had spent more time talking to Gobber than he had paying attention to the Dragons. In the ring he had been a risk to himself and everyone else, nearly ending both himself and her when they'd faced up against the Nadder.

And thenâ€¦

And thenâ€¦

And then he had changed. Almost overnight he was able to deal quickly and efficiently with every beast put against him, quickly surpassing even Astrid herself to become Champion of the ring. And then he had justâ€¦ vanished.

She punched her pillow into a better shape and rolled onto her back again.

Search parties had been sent out to find him. For weeks they searched. Months, even. Two years passed before Stoick stopped the search. And life went on as it had been, minus a few accidental explosions every week. The village slowly dwindled, suffering a death by a thousand cuts as each dragon raid took a little more out of its citizens than they could recover.

Astrid backtracked and ran through the training days again. Hiccup had been very good at fighting the beasts, towards the end of his life. Come to think of it he hadn't actually fought them at all, had he? Dealt with, yes. But she couldn't recall a moment when he had intentionally hurt one of the beasts-

Astrid's eyes snapped open with the revelation. She stared at the thatched ceiling of her home, brow furrowed as she recalled what she could of those days in the training arena.

No dragon had ever been wounded by Hiccup. Ever. They'd been subdued, but not hurt.

The Shield-Maiden sat up and gathered her furs around her. She had not let go of the Dragon Manual since her pupil's discovery. It was lying on the floor beside her, and she picked it up. She rose, retrieved her boots as quietly as possible, and slipped out into the chilled night air.

The sky above her was clear, and she could make out the brilliant stars. The constellations shone brightly above her head, as did the pale cloud of the Milky Way galaxy. She trudged through the silent town. On the battlements and fortifications, she could see the guards patrolling. Each battlement was armed with a ballista and enough arrows to down a hundred Dragons. The soldiers were well-armed and vigilant. Always watching the skies for the telltale winged shadows.

Clutching the book tightly to her chest, she climbed up the hill a few hundred meters, her breath freezing in the cold air. Her destination was the Thorston household, a larger building, closer to the center of town. The twins were as stupid as Vikings came, yet they were members of one of Berk's wealthier families. Ruff-Nut had made one smart decision in her entire life, and that was marriage to Fishlegs. They had a small child to care for now, and it was pretty

much the end of Astrid's association with either of them.

She plodded up to the door and knocked hesitantly. The sound echoed around the village square. Inside the house, the baby began to cry. Astrid cringed, cursing her own thoughtlessness; this could have waited until morning.

The door opened a few seconds later to reveal Fishlegs. The man had grown larger with age, though his fat now had a layer of muscle underneath, lending a sense of strength and physicality which he had lacked in youth. His beard was thick and bushy, but his face still possessed a youthfulness which usually tended to disappear around his age. His eyes belied that, however.

Astrid and Fishlegs had never gotten along very well. Fishlegs was a planner and a thinker. Someone more at home at a table, or perhaps in a political meeting than on the battlefield. Their worlds were as far apart as fish were from birds. Astrid had been more than happy to keep it that way. Yet as she looked into his eyes, she could recognize his intelligence. He was a man who had a hundred thoughts for every word he spoke, when he spoke at all. He was useful to Berk in his own way. He had fine-tuned their farming methods and drawn up proper calendars for future planning. She knew that somewhere he was charting the Dragon attacks as well, looking for a pattern they could use. Fishlegs had weaponised sums, an impressive feat, though one Astrid had trouble appreciating as she couldn't understand most of what he was writing while sitting with his papers and charcoal.

"Astrid!" he said, clearly feeling as bewildered as she did uncomfortable.

"Hi." She said awkwardly. She cleared her throat. "Good morning."

"Usually people wait until morning to say that." The admonishment was gentle but effective.

"I know. I apologize. I was just-- look, do you have a minute?" Of the group they'd trained with, Fishlegs had been the closest to Hiccup. Of all of their generation, she knew he would know the most. Besides, he was smarter than she was. Perhaps he'd seen more, even if Hiccup hadn't said anything to him.

The man glanced back into the house. Behind him, Astrid caught Ruff-Nut's silhouette as she rocked her child back to sleep. He turned back to Astrid. "Perhaps we should talk in the Great Hall. I'll meet you there."

* * *

><p>They sat across from each other, each with a mug of ale. The Dragon Manual was sitting between them, closed. Their small table was lit by a single candle, already burned nearly to the wick. The flame flickered gently as Fishlegs waited.</p>

"What is this about, Astrid?"

"When was the last time you read the Manual?" she asked.

Fishlegs looked down at the book. He reached out with one hairy hand and gently picked it up, weighing it in his palms. "A long time ago." He admitted. "In the end there's only one lesson I've found it teaches: Kill on Sight."

"Not the Night Fury." She said.

"Run and Hide?" Fishlegs chuckled; a warm sound which made her smile. He said, "I used to categorize them, you know? I'd give them traits and try to measure them. I wanted to gauge the threat of each individual dragon."

"The threat is deadly." Astrid replied blankly. "Always deadly."

He nodded, "That's what I decided in the end as well. I gave up on that project and decided to find something more useful."

She took a sip of her mead, and he followed suit, leaving a little white line of foam in his moustache.

"There's a picture of a Night Fury in there." She said, setting her mug down on the rough wooden surface.

"Really?" Fishlegs frowned. He opened the book and flipped to the Night Fury entry, then a page further. His eyebrows rose as he peered down his nose at the drawing.

"I think Hiccup drew it."

"It looks like one of his." The man agreed, traced the drawing with a thick finger. He turned the page back and read the new addition to the entry. "â€œ|Hates Eelsâ€œ|"

"How would he know?"

"Perhaps he tried to feed it one?" Fishlegs suggested in a light tone.

"I'm serious!"

The man frowned and looked back down at the entry. With slow, deliberate movements he flipped back through the dusty pages until he reached the entry on the two-headed Zippelback. Fishlegs read slowly down the entry. He nodded in satisfaction when he reached the end. Smirking, he handed it across to Astrid, his finger resting on a particular passage, again in Hiccup's careful printing.

"Hates eels." She read.

"Do you remember the day we faced the zippleback?" he asked. "It nearly had him and then it backed off. He chased it right back into its pen."

"I remember." Astrid said shortly. Everyone did. The move had left everyone else in the arena stunned, and Hiccup had wandered off in his usual awkward manner.

"The dragon feeders found an Eel in the cage with it when they opened the doors." Fishlegs said quietly. "I remember my father speaking to them about it. They had no idea how it got there. Those dragons were

fed fish offal from the butchers. At the time it was simply another unsolved mystery. But nowâ€?"

"You think hiccup put it there?"

"I think Hiccup had it with him the entire time."

"To protect himself?"

Fishlegs smiled at her. "Well he couldn't use a sword, could he?"

Astrid nodded; that much was true. "Why would he write it in the book, though?"

"To pass on his knowledge? That would be my guess." Fishlegs took the book from her and closed it with a snap. He rested it on his knee and stared across the table at her, his mug looking tiny as he held it in his enormous hand, sipping occasionally.

"Why do you care, Astrid? You never bothered about Hiccup."

"I don't care. I justâ€!"

"You woke me up in the middle of the night."

Astrid's mouth shut. She said, "Why did he draw that picture, Fishlegs? How would he know what a Night Fury looks like?"

"I don't know." The man replied. "My guess would be that he saw one. You do realize that Night Furies stopped attacking Berk at the same time he disappeared, right? Perhaps he killed one. Or scared it or something."

Astrid stared. Across the table, Fishlegs guzzled the remainder of his ale. He rose to his feet a little unsteadily, sliding the chair back with a creak. "Regardless, I've a wife to calm and a child to put to bed." He waved the Manual. "I'll be keeping this for a while, if you don't mind."

"Sure." She watched as with heavy steps he headed for the Great Hall's massive door.

"Should I talk to Gobber?" she called.

Fishlegs turned and shrugged his massive shoulders. "If you like. Personally I'd keep training the children. According to my charts the dragons are scheduled back in two days and we've got a lot to prepare for."

* * *

><p>Of all the characters, I honestly think Fishlegs would change the most with age. I'll be revisiting him a little later in the story.

4. Chapter 4

Prodigal Son 4

During the day Hiccup dressed himself in a loose tunic and baggy leggings under a set of nondescript brown robes. They were getting a little threadbare, but he could pass through the sweltering, dusty streets like any other resident. The flight leathers would attract attention, and were far too stuffy in any case. He kept himself busy during the hottest parts of the day, when Toothless dozed. The air was too sizzling hot, and the sky too clear to take the Dragon out in the daytime regardless.

Instead Hiccup amused himself by exploring Eskendereyya. The city had plenty to offer an inquisitive mind. There was the Library, of course, which he perused at will. There was the museum as well, the public gardens, the amphitheatre, the various mosques, churches, and temples. The City was rife with ancient ruins from earlier Greek and Egyptian eras, brought to their fates by war and changing times.

Today Hiccup's morning was spent at the Amphitheater. Prometheus Bound was being performed. A rather brutal Greek tragedy about the punishment exacted upon the titan who brought fire to Humanity. Hiccup felt a great deal of sympathy for Prometheus, and admiration for the Titan's steadfast defiance. Prometheus was truly a character who would rather die on his feet than live on his knees. Hiccup found that the titan's punishment was as undeserved as it was horrific. In the play, the titan had done so much for the human race, teaching them everything from metallurgy to medicine to mathematics. It was unfair that someone so devoted to the health and learning of others should be punished.

After the Amphitheatre, Hiccup browsed the markets for a little while. He bought some fruit at the same shop he'd stolen from the previous night. The shopkeeper was there, sporting a foul temper and, judging by his stiff walk, a bruised bottom. Hiccup didn't mind too much. The bolt the man had fired at them had passed within a yard of Toothless.

In the afternoons he worked at a Smithy in the Agora, the town square across the bay from the Pharos, the great lighthouse of Eskendereyya. Built entirely of limestone blocks with an oven at the top capable of throwing light a solid mile across the ocean, the lighthouse was the tallest structure in the world, but height had long ago ceased to impress Hiccup. He loved looking at it, though. It was a testament to the brilliance and ingenuity of Sostratus, its architect. It was also an important civic symbol for the citizens. Julius Caesar himself, when he had conquered the city, had cited it as an important strategic location. In his book (which Hiccup had studied and thoroughly enjoyed), he said that those who controlled it, controlled the harbor of Eskendereyya. And those who controlled the harbor, controlled the city.

It was visible from the window of the Smithy. The forge itself was a small place, yet bustling with activity. It was owned and operated by a Gaul named Yanick Erwan, a former slave whose owner had 'employed' him at a forge in Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. He had worked there for thirty years and eventually escaped. He stowed away on the first ship headed south, and settled in Eskendereyya.

The man was harsh, but honest, and Hiccup got along quite well with

him, even if they did drive each other crazy at times. He reminded Hiccup of Gobber, though Yanick was far narrower across the shoulders, and far less burly. He also was not missing any limbs.

Hiccup entered quietly through the back of the forge, and hung his robes on a nearby hook, trading them for a leather apron and thick gloves.

The Gaul was at the bellows, huffing and sweating in the intense heat. His body dipped as he pumped air into the forge. You're late again." He called out, catching sight of Hiccup. "You were due in at midday."

"Sorry. Had a late night."

"Up with a woman?" the wiry Gaul asked gruffly, pumping the enormous handle downwards. The coals flared a bright, vicious red, and heat billowed out from the forge's open door. An enormous puck of iron lay in there, growing red hot.

"Up with a book."

"And here I was all ready to forgive you. You need to get your priorities straight, Hiccup."

Hiccup glanced around the shop. "Where's Alan?"

The man's other apprentice was frequently absent.

"Dead grandmother." Yanick grunted.

"That'd be his third this year." Hiccup picked up a shovel and added more charcoal to the forge.

"Ha! And seventh total."

"Strange family, he has."

"Here, pump the bellows." Yanick handed his task off to Hiccup, who took it without complaint. He watched as the sinewy forgemaster circled around and used a pair of tongs to lift the hot chunk of metal out of the oven. He lay it down on his anvil and gave it a harsh pounding, drawing it out. Then he flipped it over and placed it back in the heat.

Technically Hiccup wasn't the man's apprentice. He had marketed himself more as a consultant. There were plenty of mechanical problems to be solved in and around the city, many of them not just metallurgical in nature. It was a market Yanick wanted to break into, and he paid Hiccup a respectable sum to repair mechanical problems on his behalf. A week beforehand the young man had been sent out to fix a sluice gate in the city's canal. He had, in record time at a reasonable price. As a result, Yanick's Smithy was top in the running for a long-term contract with the city's public works committee.

Yet Hiccup knew his way around a forge. He had worked in Gobber's smithy since he was small, and during the quieter days he did more than his fair share helping Yanick and Alan as they crafted tools for the citizens of Eskendereyya. It had been a startling discovery for

Hiccup, when he'd first started traveling. The smithy on Berk had crafted an incredibly disproportionate amount of weapons. Most Smithies in the rest of the world created far more tools than arms. The rest of the world, however, wasn't under constant threat of dragon attack.

"What is that going to be?" Hiccup called out as he pumped the bellows.

"A plow for Vasilis Argyris. He said his old one's got a nasty crack in it. Ain't going to last much longer." Squinting in the forge's light, Yanick grimaced down at his creation. "It's too soft, though."

"Add more charcoal." Hiccup suggested over the roaring flames. "It'll harden it a little."

"I was getting' there." The Gaul grumbled. He lumbered over to his coal pile and shoveled a few more into the fire. A few sparks flew out and lit upon his greying, gristly beard, promptly relighting themselves. He patted the fires out absentmindedly and kept watching the forge.

"So when are you gonna look into getting'a young lady, Hiccup? Can't spend all your time around books."

"Can't spend all your time in bed, either." Hiccup grunted, straining on the bellows, "Gets you lazy."

"You actually lain with one?"

"Not your business, Yanick."

The smith joined him and together they thrust the handle up and down. "A girl up north, then?" Yanick grinned, "I hear the Scandinavian women are all blondes."

Unwilling images of Astrid flitted across Hiccup's mind. He worked hard to suppress them; it wasn't worth the heartache. Or the headache. "Some are, some aren't."

They fell into five minutes of silence.

"What the hell are you always reading anyway?"

"History, philosophy, mathematics, geometry, architecture, astronomy, poetryâ€¢" with each word, Hiccup pumped the bellows rhythmically.

"Too much." Yanick shook his head. "It's too bloody much. All you need to know is right here in this forge, Hiccup. Ain't no point in reading."

"Want and need are two different things, Yanick."

"Maybe." For all his gruffness, there was an undertone of jealousy and admiration in the Gaul's questions. The man was capable of the basic computation required to run a business, but Hiccup knew his employer couldn't read at all.

"Do you want to learn how?"

Yanick shook his head sourly. "Past my time, I think. Can't teach an old dog new tricks, Hiccup. You can only watch him get slower."

"Aw, c'mon Yanick. You're not that old." Hiccup smirked, "Very dogged though."

"Smartmouth."

They worked for a good two hours, Hiccup rotating between the jobs of striking and pumping as required. In due course, a plow began to take shape. They were interrupted several times by various customers requiring everything from chains to nails to horseshoes. Yanick always headed to the front counter to assist them while Hiccup stayed back, working the bellows. Another half hour passed without incident.

Yanick and Hiccup worked in tandem, shaping the curve of the new plow and adding more heat where necessary. The forgemaster was called away once again, this time by an olive-skinned man with a goatee, a wrinkled face and a pale, sun-faded bandana. He would have been unremarkable were it not for two things.

The first was his familiarity with Yanick. The moment he spotted his customer, the Gaul beamed and let out a jubilated whoop. The man replied in kind, and the two shared an embrace over the counter, greeting each other as old friends would.

The second striking feature was the young woman following him. A slim, olive-skinned beauty with wide brown eyes and sweeping curls of dark hair. Her eyes found Hiccup's as the older man â€“her father, or so Hiccup hoped- was occupied with Yanick. As he met her gaze he smiled, his hands momentarily slipped off the bellows. The thick wooden handle rose to smack him in the face. He fell backwards, crying out in surprise and pain.

"What in God's name are you up to back there, Hiccup?" He barely heard Yanick's shout over the throbbing in his nose. He could feel warm blood beginning to flow down onto his upper lip. Half-blinded, he stumbled over to the bench and felt around for a rag, which he found in short order and clamped over his nose.

"Hiccup, get over here!" Yanick hollered.

The young Viking scrambled over to the counter, one hand pinching his nose. Lovely. What a wonderful introduction.

Yanick gave him an impatient, exasperated glare. "How many times have I told you never let go of the handle? Do that enough times and it'll turn you simple."

"Well at least then we'll be able to think on the same level." Hiccup shot back snidely, his voice muffled and nasal. Wellâ€| _more_ nasal.

Yanick cuffed him smartly and turned back to the duo. The young woman was biting her lip, trying not to laugh. Her associate looked equally as amused. Hiccup noted the wheelbarrow they were toting behind them. They had moved it under the cloth canopy which served as a

storefront, mostly to avoid the jostling crowds of people. The Barrow looked to be full of rope and broken mechanical devices. He raised his eyebrow, his interest piqued.

"This here's Anton Pandev." Yanick patted his friend on the shoulder. "And his daughter."

"Shahira Pandev" She thrust a hand forward, which Hiccup shook, well aware that his own hand was covered in soot. Hell, he was probably covered from head to toe. It came hand in hand with working in a forge. Sure enough, when she let go, her hand came away covered in black streaks. She didn't seem to mind, wiping it absentmindedly on her pant leg.

Hiccup addressed Yanick first. "How do you two know eachother?"

"This sea dog was the one who carried me south from Constantinople. It's thanks to him I have my freedom."

"We've heard a lot about you, Hiccup." Anton chortled merrily. "Yanick wrote to me not two months ago. Said a verified genius had waltzed right into his shop, looking for a job."

"I don't know if genius is the right wordâ€!" Hiccup said, shrugging. "I just fix things I guess."

"Wow." Yanick murmured. "Try not to oversell it. You'll drive the customers away." He turned to Anton, "He's pretty brilliant. Works hard, can fix damned near anything I hand him. When he shows up on time, that is."

"Hey, I've had no grandmother's funerals yet."

"Let's keep it that way."

"We hear you can fix everything. All kinds of things." Anton replied, still in that jovial tone.

"What's the problem, exactly?" Hiccup eyed the barrow.

"The problem, my boy, is Pirates. They keep trying to raid my boat and steal my catches. I've outrun them, but it's been close. And the last timeâ€!" he gestured down at the wheelbarrow.

Hiccup leaned over the broken pulley system. "Your rigging broke?"

"We need better tackle blocks." The woman said, moving up to stand beside her father. "I rub wax on them, and they've been treated with oils but they keep seizing up when we pressure them too much."

"And then they crack." Hiccup nodded, "I've seen the problem before."

"What we need is to get a message to Constantinople and tell them to kick the Saracen pirates off of Crete." Anton declared.

"Not bloody likely." Yanick said sourly. "They took Crete from us, remember? The Byzantine Empire is crumbling. Everyone knows it. Too

many high-paid bureaucrats, not enough soldiers."

Hiccup took a moment to check his nose. It was still throbbing, but at least the bleeding had stopped. Anton was talking.

"Well something has to be done! They're raiding towns all along the coastline now. If those pirates get any further into the Mediterranean, they're going to be nosing around the Pharos Lighthouse!"

"Sorry to interrupt, but how did you get away last time?" Hiccup asked. "I mean, if your rigging brokeâ€|"

"We still had our jib sail." Anton said.

"And enough of a lead to get into the shallows." The girl added.

"It was Shahira's idea, actually." Anton laid a proud hand on his daughter's shoulder. "We had to dump our catch to lighten the boat, but it worked. The Saracen ships have a deeper draft than ours, and they don't know the waters. They got stuck!"

"And we got a clean getaway." Shahira added smugly.

"That's really smart." Hiccup said earnestly. She beamed.

"We still had to limp back to the harbor, though." Anton said. "My ship needs to be able to take more than she does right now. Fix my pulleys, boy. Make'em work like I want'em to."

"You shouldn't work them too hard." Hiccup warned. "Even if the pulleys can take more pressure, it doesn't mean the mast or the shrouds will take it."

"Don't worry, boy." Anton waved a hand. "I know my ship. Just solve the problem. You'll be paid handsomely. I can promise you that."

"It's half-price." Yanick said.

Hiccup gave him a confused look; it wasn't often the Gaul slashed prices. Yanick clarified. "That'd be your half, Hiccup. I'll do my part Pro Bono."

Anton grinned. "That'd be why I keep coming back to you, my friend."

Hiccup sighed and shook his head. "Alright then."

The sailor nodded in satisfaction. He bid Yanick farewell and strode into the crowd, headed towards the harbor. His daughter lingered a moment longer, and gave Hiccup a wave which he awkwardly returned. She headed out into the crowd after her father.

"Good man, that. Especially for a Macedonian." Yanick said thoughtfully. He crossed behind Hiccup and grabbed the barrow handles. "You know he found me stowed away on his boat and just gave me free passage? Helped me get set up here. Moment he found I'd escaped he did everything he could to help. Just didn't believe in slavery I guess."

"Sounds like a good man." Hiccup agreed thoughtfully, "I wonder if he'd pay me in fishâ€?"

Yanick gave him an incredulous stare. "You are an odd one, Hiccup Haddock. C'mon, let's get this stuff into the shop."

* * *

><p>I almost feel like I should separate this out into two stories. I'd rather not have any mood whiplash going on.

15/03/03- Changed 'Moor' to Saracen for consistency, and made a few small edits.

5. Chapter 5

Prodigal Son 5

Late the following afternoon, Astrid was striding through Berk on her way to the forge. She had dismissed the lesson early, much to the shock of her students, but she had other things on her mind. The smithy was occupied, as it always was. Astrid could hear the distant sound of Gobber's hammer from half a street away. The old Viking was always at the forge. Wheelbarrows full of broken weapons sat outside in strict order; his work was piling up.

Gobber was covered in sweat and blackened by charcoal. His moustache was smoking slightly, yet he huffed and puffed and toiled away, hammering diligently at a catapult's sling. He glanced up when her shadow blocked the doorway, but he didn't stop hammering.

"Hello, lass. Your axe needin' more repairs, then?"

"Actually no. I just came to talk."

"Really?" stopping in mid swing, the smith looked up from his work, his long, braided moustache swaying dangerously close to the sizzling metal. He looked stunned and curious, despite the dark bags under his eyes.

She nodded.

He studied her with a certain amount of apprehension and lowered his hammer. He set his work back in the forge and turned. "First for everythin' I suppose. Alright then, Astrid, what did you want ta talk abou'?"

Astrid took a deep breath and said, "Hiccup."

The smith's shoulders tensed. He pulled the tongs off of his stump and tossed them into his toolbox with a certain amount of excessive force. "The trouble with this town." He began harshly as he searched for a replacement hand, "Is that no one is ever bloody willing to let things bloody be."

"What do you mean?"

"Fishlegs was already here this morning, asking for a tour of the back room. No one's ever asked that. Odin's beard, it's been eight years! Why in Thor's name is everyone suddenly so interested in Hiccup?"

So Fishlegs was tugging on this thread too? Good. "We think Hiccup may have found something. A way to fight the dragons!"

"We've been inventing ways to fight dragons for three hundred years, Astrid." Gobber said, exhausted. He hobbled back over to the forge. "I'd wager we've found every method there is by now. If tha's all, then please go away. I have enough work to do as it is."

"Hiccup never hurt them, though." Astrid said, following him further inside.

"Course not. He couldn't exactly carry a weapon, could he?" the smith fixed an enormous striking hammer to his stump. He grabbed a pair of tongs with his other hand and resumed his work.

To her annoyance, Astrid found she was forced to shout over the sound of his hammering. "Thing isâ€¢ I was thinking back on it, andâ€¢ do you think he wanted to? Kill dragons, I mean?"

Gobber skipped a step in his rhythmic pounding, but he didn't stop. "O'course he did. Nothing would ha' pleased Stoick more."

"Yeah. Because Hiccup was a master at that." Astrid laughed, and immediately realized it was a mistake.

The smith's tongs landed on the ground beside him. Gobber leaned over the hot metal, the orange light throwing his face into menacing shadows. He said, "Tha's Stoick's fault. Not the boy's." he scowled, his expression one of distaste as he peered out at her from beneath thick blonde eyebrows, judging her inch by inch, head to toe.

Astrid swallowed.

"The biggest problem Berk has is tha' its people have forgotten to recognize tha' there's brilliance off the battlefield."

"That's our biggest problem? I guess you've forgotten about the dragons, then." Astrid shot back defiantly, feeling stung.

Gobber's eyes narrowed further. He gently set the striking hammer down on the anvil with a quiet clink, his stump fully exposed for her to see. He settled there for a moment, letting her take in the full extent of his injury. Ancient though it was, he lived with it every waking minute of every day.

"Care ta say tha' again, lass?" He growled.

Astrid opened her mouth stupidly; experienced as she was, she couldn't say she'd lost a limb to the beasts yet. She shut it and swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"Tha's wha' I thought." The smith was suddenly in motion again, limping across the forge as if nothing had ever happened. "Bu' you want ta know abou' Hiccup." He vanished behind a flap of leather, into the room behind his smithy. Into what had been Hiccup's study.

Astrid could hear the shuffling of papers. He reappeared a moment later, turning sideways to fit through the narrow opening. In his single hand he was carrying an enormous yellowing sheaf of dried papers. "I wonder if yer really as thick-headed as ya like ta act."

Handling it with the utmost care, he handed the thick stack to her. Astrid took it as gently as she could, cuddling it close to her chest as she would a newborn child, knowing it was the only way to appease the angry smith.

"Tha's the last I have o' the boy. Ya damage those pages an' I will never sharpen or fix a weapon for you again." Gobber promised.

Astrid believed him.

* * *

><p>The Hofferson household was hardly a place of peace and quiet. Astrid's family was large and tightly packed. There was always shouting and arguing and fighting of one sort or another goin on, though far less violent than the Thorston home. Even so, she was forced to search elsewhere for the necessary peace and quiet.</p>

She settled in a quiet corner of the Great Hall, a bowl of stew in her lap and a jug of mead at her side. The only things on the table were a bright candle, placed some distance away, and the sheaf of papers which Gobber had handed her.

Astrid wasn't exactly sure what she was looking for. Another note, perhaps. Another sketch of the Night Fury. Something, at least. Some hint about what the boy had found.

The page on top was none other than a sketch of a water-driven mill. The mill in question had been completed four years ago. It sat at the nearest river, a good five minutes from town. The building was one of the few which wasn't burned down by dragons every three weeks, and it had increased Berk's timber output by nearly tenfold. Raw resources had been suddenly made available for much-needed repairs. It was the first time in Astrid's memory that the Vikings had been able to keep up, even stock and save timber for the damages the Dragons caused.

The mill had been attacked once, but it was roofed entirely by thick layers of sand, mud and shale. The walls were stone, as were the pillars which held it up. No thatched roofs or wooden timbers for the Dragons to burn. An expensive proposition, tricky to build, yet it meant that the building was fireproof. Or fire-resistant enough to survive the attacks. The Vikings would always have wood available.

It had been built four years after Hiccup's departure. So how had he sketched it? It was definitely Hiccup's style, with long, broad, confident strokes. But how had he known about it?

She turned the page over and stared. There was the mill again, this time cut-away to show the intricate machinery inside it. Enormous cogs and gears driven by the waterwheel which was also housed in an enormous stone shell.

The mechanisms were broken down further in the pages beyond. Hiccup knew exactly what he was looking at. There were no smudged lines or corrections that Astrid could see. The boy had designed it himself, seen the images in his mind. An entire, fully operation watermill sat in his head and he had simply put it down on paper, with a list of the materials required to build it, and an estimate of the cost and time. Other calculations were there as well. A meticulous comparison between time spent collecting and cutting logs beforehand, and the time saved with the addition of the Mill.

And that was just the start. As Astrid flipped through the pile, she saw more and more designs. A system of trenches for getting fresh water to Berk's farms, a tower with a large bucket on the top and a nozzle underneath forming an artificial waterfall. So far as she could tell, it was so that the Vikings could bath more quickly. Who thought about that kind of thing? He had even devised a system to move water uphill using some sort of giant screw in a trough.

There were building plans. House designs unlike anything she had ever seen, which would keep Berk's houses toasty warm in the long, harsh winter, and cool in the summer no matter what the temperature. The secret lay in the way the opening and closing of various windows and doors affected the flow of air, which was drawn either from a strange basement forge, or a cool cellar with rat tunnels to the outdoors.

There were mechanical devices as well. On the civilian side, there were dozens of cranes and pulley systems all designed to ease the reconstruction process. Many of them were at work even today. Hiccup had recognized the springy quality of the siding planks on Viking longboats, and put it between the axle and the carriage of horse carts as a sort of shock absorber to soften the blow of uneven ground. It would probably cut the amount of broken wheels in half if anyone could be bothered to apply it. On the military side, Astrid recognized an incredible array of net-traps, ballistae, catapults, and trebuchets, all of which had been constructed and placed at strategic locations around Berk. She had grown up around them. Gobber had churned them out by the dozen. They were a staple of Berk's defensive strategy and they had all come from Hiccup? Out of that fourteen-year-old's brain? Thor almighty! She suddenly understood what Gobber had meant when he said brilliance off the battlefield.

It wasn't just completed designs, either. Astrid came across a ballistae which could fire an entire bundle of arrows, tied with thin twin designed to break under the strain of fire. It was difficult sometimes, to hit a dragon with one arrow. One had to lead the target and account for wind and other factors, all the while being careful that the Dragon wasn't after them. Yet with this machineâ€¦ it would be impossible to miss! But it wasn't just one drawing. That design came with no less than twenty-six pages of revisions.

The door to the hall opened, letting in a gust of cold air. Laughter, giggling women and drunken shouting disrupted the silence. A great call echoed across the hall, and Astrid grimaced as she recognized Tuff-Nut's drawling, trollish voice. "Attention Hairy Hooligans!"

The Hall's few occupants, old Vikings and a bar maid or two, glanced

up. Astrid kept her gaze fixed firmly upon the pages in front of her. Reading wasn't her usual activity, and she idly wondered if she'd be recognized at all.

A procession was entering the Hall. Two dozen young warriors came first, led by Tuff-Nut Thorston who had clearly found a new place for himself after Ruff-Nut's marriage inevitably separated the twins. The gangly warrior waved an arm and gave a majestic bow. "Second only to Stoick the Vast, I give you Snotlout Jorgenson, the Dragon's Bane. Second only to Chief Stoick the Vast himself!"

The older Vikings went back to their meals, unconcerned. Behind the bar, the maids began to fill their flagons, knowing what was coming. Astrid grimaced and stuck her nose further into the pages, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. The great hall had been a bad decision after all.

A gaggle of giggling women followed the warriors, with a brilliant white horse just behind them. Seated atop it! Ah. There he was, the _other _reason Astrid lived in the Dragon training arena. Gods how she hated him. Every inch of him. From his burly, bulging muscles to that aggressive spiky sideburns, to his horned helmet and smugly arrogant face. He was a spitting image of his father, lacking only in Spitelout's deference to proper authority. Snotlout wasn't interested in serving his chief, or his village. He was after glory.

Snotlout Dragon's Bane held up a hand and his entourage quieted down. He slipped off the horse, which was promptly removed and guided back out the door by his cousin Gustav. Snotlout strutted confidently down the length of the great hall. The rest of his group followed a few paces behind.

Astrid buried herself even further in the pages, and to her dismay the movement caught his eye. He sauntered over and leered at her.

"Hey Astrid."

She didn't look up. "Snotlout."

Across the table, a chair was pulled back. The man slouched into it, eyeing her up.

"What are you doing?"

"Reading."

"_Reading?_" Snotlout snorted. "Why read words when you can just kill the stuff the words tell you stuff about?"

"What if it was a book about farming?"

"I'm not a farmer, Astrid. Neither are you. We're both great warriors. I meanâ€¦ you're obviously not as good as me, but there's no shame in that. No one else is either." He reached over to pat her hand sympathetically, but she lifted it off the table and sat on it. The man shot her a dirty look and crossed his arms. His chin was stuck out in an unsympathetic pout.

He said, "What would you say if I told you I was thinking of signing

up to teach Dragon Training?"

"Nothing civil."

"I think the younger generations could benefit from my knowledge." He said, flexing visibly.

Astrid ignored him, mostly because she had no response to that. On the one hand, an entire village of miniature Snotlouts was a horrific image. She couldn't stand the man. On the other, once one stripped away the incredibly thick layers of ego, the man was a genuinely useful warrior. He did kill dragons. A lot of them. Not as many as she did, but Astrid was less interested in boasting than she was in seeing that the beasts did not steal their livestock, or burn their homes. Or eat any more children.

She was sorry to realize that Snotlout was still speaking. "You can stay too. I need an assistant. Someone needs to clean the arena after me and my Snot-Drops finish learning how to kick dragon ass."

"Snot-Drops?"

"My devoted students, obviously."

"Urk."

A barmaid came by and set a flagon of ale down in front of the burly Viking. He took several long gulps, then set it down and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Your mother turned down another one of my marriage offers."

"I'll have to thank her. Again. I didn't even know you'd made one."

"C'mon, Astrid. You and me? We belong together. Don't you want to be one of my Snotmen?"

She shot his entourage a withering glance. "With a name like that, how could I not?"

"I know, right?" he sat back and crossed his arms with a confidant grin. "I thought of it myself."

"I bet that took a while."

"Actually not at all." Snotlout said proudly. "It just rolled right off the tongue. I guess I'm just that brilliant."

"Yes. Yes you are."

"Exactly."

"Yep." Astrid kept her attention on the papers.

Snotlout huffed in frustration and leaned forward to grab the sheaf of papers. Without any warning a knife slammed down into the table, a mere inch from severing his pointer finger. Snotlout yelped and pulled his hand back. Holding his shocked gaze, Astrid let go of the

weapon and went back to her reading. It remained there, fixed in the table.

"That's impressive aim, babe!" He said. "You hit right between my fingers."

"Don't call me that. And it was all luck; I wasn't looking."

For the first time since the conversation started, Snoutlout's confidence faltered. He said, "You weren't even looking? But you could have taken a finger off!"

"All the more reason to keep them to yourself next time." She leaned forward. "It has to be obvious, how much I hate you. Go away."

Red slowly spread across the hairy hooligan's cheeks. He sat there, wide-eyed and huffing in fury. Astrid thought for a moment that he was winding up to hit her, but instead he slammed his mug down on the table and launched himself to his feet. He jabbed his finger at her. "One day, Astrid! One day!" Then he turned and stalked back to his admirers.

It was a vague threat he made once every few weeks. Unconcerned, Astrid resumed her examination of Hiccup's drawings. Across the bar, Snotlout and his companions set about drinking their evening away.

The remainder of the pile proved to be just as startling as the sizeable portion she had already read. Hiccup had invented tools of every variety, and solutions to a vast array of everyday problems which Berk still struggled with. There were building tools which used winches, levers, slings and ropework to lift enormous weights high off the ground with safety and control. There was even a fire suppression system. Metal pipes lead down from a lake high on the mountainside. The network would run high above the heads of Berk's citizens, a web of piping with each individual branch ending on the roof of a building. The water would flow out a spigot atop each building, with a wide spray nozzle designed to soak the entire structure with a fountain of droplets spraying in every direction.

Hiccup had specified that each spigot be sealed with a thick wad of candle wax. That way, the mere proximity of dragon fire would melt the wax. The water would come bursting through and soak anything nearby, but only when it was near dragon fire.

Gods above, he was brilliant! How much property could this system have saved? How many buildings? How many lives? For the first time, Astrid felt a twinge of guilt. How badly she had treated him. This was a mind they could have nurtured much to Berk's benefit. Yet she had been so set on Dragons, on fighting and war!

The boy's loss was not a gift to Berk, despite his frequent accidents, it was a tragedy.

Equally disappointing was the fact that Gobber's collection, while fascinating, and something she intended to bring to Berk's attention, held no clues as to the Night Fury diagram, nor of Hiccup's other mysterious additions to the Book of Dragons.

Astrid was going to have to search closer to the source. She was going to have to talk to the Chief.

6. Chapter 6

Prodigal Son 6

It was once again nighttime in Eskendereyya. Hiccup took a seat and let his knees dangle over the sandstone edge of the city's tetrapylon, an enormous archway overlooking the agora, a public gathering place. Hiccup had wandered it during the daytime. It was a fascinating place, always full of discussion and activity. Hiccup had been there not three days ago, discussing religion with a Christian missionary. The man had seemed hell-bent on convincing Hiccup to follow his one God. One! Just one! How could there only be one god?

'God is love' the priest had told him. Apparently the forgiving, all-powerful deity cared for his children. But how that be when such things as disease existed? At least the Norse gods, with their bickering, wars and in-fighting, explained the state of the world. Hiccup often wondered whether or not the world would be better managed if Odin stopped wandering and spent some more time on his throne.

Another man, from Jerusalem, had been trying to raise funds for a ladder to the sky. Had not the Prophet Muhammad had ascended to Heaven during the Mi'raj? Jacob too had seen a ladder, leading straight from heaven to earth. Accordingly heaven must have been a set distance from the ground, so a ladder long enough would surely be able to carry a man up there. Right?

Privately, Hiccup suspected that the quoted stories were more metaphorical than his companion thought. The reality of constructing such an object made the whole idea so much worse. Any ladder secure enough to reach all the way to heaven would have to have an enormous base in order to support its own weight. Instead of wood, it would have to be constructed of the strongest stone to keep itself from collapsing to either side in the wind (although perhaps something could be done with ropes, the way masts were held up on ships). No matter, it was a costly, time-consuming project and Hiccup suspected that the God's wouldn't appreciate mortals suddenly knocking on the doors of Valhalla without an invitation.

All in all, a bad idea.

During one of his exploratory expeditions, Hiccup himself had tried to touch the sky. Yet no matter how high he flew, the stars were always miles away. It got mighty cold up there, and the air got very thin. He had nearly passed out. If it hadn't been for Toothless' insistence that they wouldn't go any further, they both would have suffered horrible deaths.

The dragon was with him now, inspecting the bustling crowds below with his big, round, curious green eyes. An older man in a turban passed under the arch, carrying a bucket of raw red meat with him.

"Stay." Hiccup ordered as Toothless leaned all the way over the side

of the sandstone structure until his head was poking out upside down under the archway, watching the man's retreating back. Thankfully no one on the ground noticed.

From his satchel, Hiccup retrieved one of Anton Pandev's broken pulleys. He carefully examined the splintered wooden device, picking the mechanism apart in his mind's eye. He visualized the theoretical repaired pieces, how they were supposed to come together, and how the various forces acting upon the pulley caused it to fail in the first place.

Friction between the rope and the pulley's outer race was negligible. At least for simple systems. There came a point in block and tackle systems where the reduced effort was countered by the sheer amount of friction between the rope and the pulley system.

Pulley systems were similar to levers in that they were a tradeoff between force and distance. Basic pulley systems could halve, even quarter the amount of work required to perform a task whether it was lift a weight, provide tension, or tether a moving object as these were meant to. It didn't matter. Two forces were applied to either end of the line. One force had to overcome the other. One man could lift a load fit for four, but he'd require around four times the distance in rope.

In this case, failure had occurred between the pulley and its axle. Too much friction had resulted in the mechanical system seizing up and cracking. Lubrication was helpful of course, when applied properly. Shahira had told him that she had rubbed wax on the pulley, and she had. She had just applied it to the groove which the rope ran through instead of the contact points between the axle and the wheel.

Toothless the dragon let out a low, curious coo. He nudged the pulley with his nose, sniffing it.

"Yeah, you can smell the fish on it, can't you, buddy?"

Toothless sat on his haunches and fixed Hiccup with an excited look, tongue lolling and black tail wagging.

"Calm down, bud. We'll eat later. Have some patience."

Toothless' tail flopped to the sandstone surface. The dragon fixed him with a scowl. It huffed in annoyance and curled up on the far side of the tetravylon. He shot Hiccup one last glare then put his tail flap up so he didn't have to look at the boy.

"Oh, quit whining you big baby." Hiccup shook his head and looked down at the pulley, considering the problem. Even if the device had been properly and regularly lubricated, which it hadn't, that wouldn't have solved their problem.

A different system was needed. A new solution.

Hiccup set the pulley down beside him and clasped his hands on his thighs, watching the crowds ebb and flow beneath him. Several carts rolled by, bouncing down the cobbled street. He watched their wheels turn, visualizing the system. Wheel and Axleâ€!

Not entirely applicable, since the axle on the cart was actually fixed to the wheel. It was a different system.

Yet Hiccup's gut was telling him that the answer was in there somewhere. Friction was the problem. And wheels were so effective because they rolled instead of sliding, thus negating friction between the load and the surface it needed to travel across.

Round objects handled compressive forces differently. That was the secret behind Roman arches. Once, on a bet with a priest, Hiccup had used four eggs to support a thick copy of the Bible. Members of the priest's congregation promptly accused him of sorcery and chased him away with pitchforks and torches. In retrospect it was a good thing he had not told them about toothless. Still, there was strength concealed in the shape of a circle. Load bearing and minimal frictionâ€|

He began to search the street scene for other circles. Other examples. A shopkeeper's fruit stand yielded no answers. A few more carts trundled by, but Hiccup's gaze fell upon a group of children, who had set up a game of marbles in a narrow doorway near the base of the arch. He watched the small globes roll across the mat, impacting one another.

At that very moment, the curtain opened and a scribe carrying an armful of scrolls stepped out onto the street. His feet slid on the marbles, upsetting the children's game and more importantly sending him flying. His scrolls scattered across the causeway. One of them rolled open in the middle of the street, revealing a map of Eskendereyya with several important landmarks circled on it, including the Pharos lighthouse. The Scribe dove for it and scooped it up in his arms. A crowd gathered immediately, helping him back to his feet. A few stern-looking adults chased the children away while others delivered the poor man's other scrolls back to him. The harried Scribe thanked them and hurried away towards the docks.

But Hiccup's mind was elsewhere as he replayed the image. The marbles had rolled under the scribe's feet. They had taken the compressive force of his weight, and rolled easily with the motion.

That was the secret! Put the wheel inside the pulley!

He leapt to his feet. "C'mon bud! I gotta get back to the forge!"

The dragon let out an impudent huff.

Hiccup sighed. "And we'll grab some fish for you on the way."

* * *

><p>Yanick Erwan arrived at his smithy early the following morning to find that the furnace was already lit. He stepped behind the curtain which separated the forge from the storefront. Alan was standing at the counter, looking thoroughly put-out.</p>

"Yanick." The apprentice said. "Hiccup booted me out of the forge."

"I'm amazed you wanted to be in there in the first place." Yanick

replied evenly. "All those 'grandma's funerals' you've had."

Alan opened and shut his mouth several times. "Sorry." He managed lamely.

"Sure you are." Yanick strode past him into the forge. The room was a mess. Tools were strewn across every available surface. The fire in the forge was going, but no one was working the bellows. Hiccup was sitting at his bench. Wire, thin iron strips and other small bits of metal had been placed in a semi-circle around him. Hiccup was asleep, his face pressed into some unknowable device which lay open on the table before him. He was snoring lightly, completely unaware of Yanick's presence.

Yanick sighed and shook his head impatiently and turned to the beaten anvil. A device was sitting on it, and in its shape the smith recognized a Pulley. With a shock he realized it was the young man's solution to Anton Pandev's problems. Instead of the simple wooden constructs Pandev's fishing vessel used, this was a combination of wood and metal, bolted together. The boy had done somethingâ€| insane.

The pulley had been separated into two parts; an outer ring, which came into contact with the rope, and an inner ring, which was meant to be fixed upon an axle. Neither ring touched the other. Instead, between the two of them, he had placed marbles. They were spaced evenly around the perimeter of the inner ring, locked in position by thin metal strips bound together with tightly wound wire. They ran along a smooth, oiled track.

Yanick held the device up in his hand and gave it a spin. The interior disk stayed completely still, while the outer spun easily and smoothly, and relatively quietly.

He had put Marbles in a pulley. Children's marbles! What on God's green earthâ€|

Yet the more Yanick thought about it, the more sense it made. It was a brilliant idea, and there was no one else insane enough to think of it, never mind actually try it.

A year ago when he'd hired the strange young Dane, he had recognized Hiccup's brilliance. It had only been proven again. The young man had wandered into his shop holding a broken linkage of some kind, and offering his services in manual labor in return for the repair. Over the following few days he had proven beyond any doubt that he was possessed of mechanical genius and he knew his way around a smithy. Yanick had scooped him up and given him a place as an apprentice and associate. Yet he still knew next to nothing about Hiccup beyond the man's insatiable curiosity and strange habits.

He quietly set the prototype down on the young smith's bench. Hiccup's robe had fallen on the floor around him. Yanick carefully picked it up and draped it across his protÃ©gÃ©'s shoulders. The youth shifted slightly and murmured something in Danish, though Yanick caught the word 'Gobber'. Not for the first time, he wondered where on earth the young man came from, and whether or not anyone was missing him back home.

* * *

><p>As far as my research (read: google) indicates, the tetrapylon in Alexandria would have looked similar to the Arch of Galerius in Thessaloniki, Greece. Regular tetrapylons were Roman monuments usually consisting of four sets of four columns built with four archways. They were usually constructed at important intersections in cities and towns. This particular arch had been placed on Canopic Street (one of Alexandria's major streets) near the library, the museum, and several temples. Not to mention the Agora or 'meeting place'. A part of the city designated for everything from civic festivals to philosophical debates.

I hope the mechanical jibber-jabber isn't too dull. But I find it's an aspect of Hiccup's personality which is under-stressed in other fics. Perhaps this is understandable on the basis that stories and characters require more emotional journeys for reader engagement, but Hiccup built a flightsuit, a false tail, and impressively complex mechanical systems out of simple materials available to a pre-industrial society. The clockwork visible in Toothless' tail in 'Gift of the Nightfury', as well as the springs mentioned in HTTYD2 -the ones which govern the stabilizing fin on the back of his flightsuit- were invented around the 1500's or later. This puts Hiccup's mechanical expertise at least six hundred years ahead of his time. I realize that this may be overanalyzing things, but his intellect and problem-solving skills in this area should not be neglected. I hope I'm doing them justice.

The marbles idea is a rudimentary version of modern ball bearings. As I said, Hiccup is working waaaay ahead of his time.

7. Chapter 7

Prodigal Son 7

Berk's chieftain lived alone. In other tribes, more ambitious Vikings might have mistaken this for weakness, and moved against him, but not the Hairy Hooligans. Stoick the Vast's prowess in battle was universally recognized, and his authority absolute. The only change had merely been Iona the Cook's nightly visitations as she provided him with a hot meal at the end of his long day.

Except for tonight. Tonight Astrid was delivering his meal. Iona had seemed more than happy to let someone else take on the delivery. At the end of the cook's shift, Astrid had witnessed her leaving with her husband, the two of them heading down towards the docks together. Astrid made up her mind to volunteer more often, if only to give the cook the break she obviously welcomed.

Her path bright in the moonlight, Astrid stalked down the long staircase towards Stoick's hut. She was thankful that the chieftain didn't live near the forge on the far side of Berk. The path was relatively short, and she wasn't at much risk of spilling the bowl of hot stew she was carrying. The Haddock Hall had once been an imposing, majestic building. Yet the exterior was marred with scorch marks from dragon attacks. The logs themselves, thick and heavy, were getting old. They had cracked in some places. The mud and rope used to seal its cracks had fallen out, or been eaten away by time and the elements. It was not obvious in the daytime, but firelight flickered through dozens of tiny holes and cracks in the walls, scattering

beams of light across the surrounding grass.

Astrid approached the door hesitantly. Inside there was only silence, save for the crackle of the fire. She reached up with and knocked three times with a steady hand.

Within, there was the sound of a scraping chair, and heavy footfalls creaking on old timber. A latch was wrestled with, and the door jerked open to reveal a mountain-sized silhouette casting its shadow upon her.

Astrid stared up at her Chief. She could barely make out his features in the dull light. Between his thick bearskin cape, and immense bulk, Stoick the Vast blocked out most of the doorway, with only a few bright streams illuminating his feet. Light threaded through his graying hairs, creating a fuzzy haze around his head. It was one of the rare moments Astrid had seen him without his long hair tied back, or his helmet.

"Astrid?" His thick, deep voice was lightly tinged with surprise.

Astrid held up the large bowl of stew in her hand, half a loaf of bread was soaking in it. "Dinner?"

"Thank you." Stoick's enormous hand eclipsed hers as, with a certain amount of gentility, he took the bowl. He shifted, the light for a moment revealed wrinkled, hawkish green eyes and a dark red beard, streaked with grey. He studied her for a moment.

"Spit it out, Astrid."

"Sir?"

"Iona usually brings the meals. You wouldn't be here unless you had something to say."

"Iâ€œ umâ€œ|. Snotlout mentioned he wanted to take up dragon training." Astrid was here for Hiccup's papers, but somehow she suspected a blunt request to search his personal belongings would not end well. She had intended to ease Stoick into it, so to speak.

"Mmm." Stoic frowned. "Did he, now?" The enormous Viking moved aside. Astrid took the invitation and stepped across the threshold with as much humility as she could muster. She settled in a small chair beside the fireplace. Stoick's home was well lived-in. Old weapons hung on the walls. A section of the lower floor had been walled off to create a bedroom for the Chief. Astrid's gaze inevitably slid sideways to the staircase which lead to the upper mezzanine; Hiccup's old room. Each stair was covered in a thick layer of dust. Several years had passed since someone had last set a foot upon that staircase.

Several of Hiccup's small trinkets had been placed at a small altar to Thor. A tiny horned helmet hung on a nail which had been driven deep into a nearby wooden pillar. As she examined it, a cold, dead weight settled on Astrid's shoulders.

Stoick strode past her. "I'm not sure why we need anyone else. You're

doing a wonderful job in the ring, Astrid." The Chieftain's lips hinted a smile. "You're doing Berk a great service."

Astrid felt a flash of pride. "Thank you, sir."

Stoick crossed Haddock Hall, his feet retreading a pale, worn path towards an enormous table with a water jug and several glasses on it. He poured himself a glass, and then offered one to her. Astrid shook her head politely.

"Soâ€|" Stoick settled back into his own chair, which creaked in protest. "Snotlout wants to be a dragon trainer."

"Yes."

"Hmmâ€|" the Chieftain's brows knitted. "And your opinion?"

"I'll do my duty to Berk." Astrid said diplomatically.

"Didn't ask that. Asked what you thought."

"I can't stand him, sir." She said honestly. "He's half the reason I'm in the ring so much."

"Ahâ€|" Stoic shifted awkwardly. "Spitelout did say your family turned down another marriage offer."

"My duty is to my clan first, sir."

"Aye, as every shield-maiden's should be." Stoick nodded in satisfaction. "But one day Snotlout is going to be Chief, Astrid."

She grimaced. "Really?"

His eyes flicked to Hiccup's forlorn helm and he pressed his lips together in a thin line. "Really. If you turn him down then it'll mean disaster for the Hofferson name. A Jorgenson with a Hofferson is a fine pairing which strengthens both houses and Berk as a whole."

"Right." Astrid said, as much to herself as to Stoick, "I'll just have to hope there's a dragon raid before our wedding night so I can enter Valhalla with dignity."

"Mind how you speak, Astrid." Stoick said quietly "He may not bear my name but he is a cousin. Haddock blood flows through his veins."

"Oh? I thought it was tall tales and mead."

Stoick gave her a stern look.

"Sorry sir."

He took a sip from his mug. "I heard you'd dismissed the class early a few days ago."

"Yes. I wasâ€| looking through some of Hiccup's old drawings. At the Smithy. Did Gobber say anything to you?"

Stoick chuckled. "Gobber hasn't had much to say to me in a long time."

Astrid frowned. The Smith and the Chieftain had been friends as long as she could remember. Though come to think of it, she didn't see them together that often in a while. At least, not since Hiccup's death.

"Gobber keeps his peace. When we're out and about at any rate. He know's it won't help things to be fighting." He set his mug down with a clink and fixed her with a keen stare. His voice grew a tad colder. "What in Hel's realm were you looking through Hiccup's old doodles for, at any rate?"

"Guilt, I guess. I didn't have much to do with him when he was alive."

"It's been eight long years, Astrid."

"Have you see Gustav lately? He looks like Hiccup did. I'm training him every day in the ring." She shrugged. "Lately it's been bringing up some old memories."

"Aye." Stoick nodded slowly, his face softening.

"Have you looked through the pages? Hiccup had some brilliant ideas. Some of them we've already built."

"The mill, I know."

"He can still help Berk, sir." Stoick was staring at her, pale and ash, and stone-faced. Astrid continued regardless, praying silently to any of the gods that her Chief would listen to her. "The fact is that I delivered your food tonight because, with all due respect to both you and his memory-

"You want to see his room?"

"I was hoping to go up there and see if he had any more drawings!"

The Chief was staring past her now, into torturous thoughts, or some far-off, painful memory.

"It'd be good for Berk, sir. I can't even guess how much it would hurt to go through it all, but there's no point in keeping it all locked up. Not of it'll save lives."

"You think that's what I'm doing, Astrid?" Stoick said, "Hoarding?"

"I didn't mean it like that, sir. I just meant-

But the enormous Viking was building up steam, his cheeks were growing red. "Do you realize what those beasts did to us? Do you think Hiccup died a Warrior's death, Astrid? Do you think he died with a weapon in his hand? Do you think he made it into Valhalla?"

Astrid kept her mouth shut, but her expression must have spoken volumes

"When I next see my son, there'll be no talk. It'll be at Ragnarok, and we'll be crossing blades!" Stoick said, shaking his head. "He's in Hel's armies now. That is what the beasts have done to us! ...I can't go up there."

"With his designs we can improve our defenses and insure no more children die the way he did." Astrid argued, feeling her foundations crumble. She was infringing on a private matter. Hiccup's notes rightfully belonged to Stoick, and his room was a place of mourning for the father. She had no business there. Besides, there was no guarantee that she'd find anything more there than she had reading through Gobber's collection. "I think it'll help at least." She said lamely.

"And I think this discussion is over." He growled. "Those were my son's private things."

Astrid nodded and rose stiffly, fighting an internal duel between disappointment and resignation. No matter how curious she was, she could not directly disobey her Chief. Especially not with something so personal. She hoped whatever strand Fishlegs was following, he'd have more success. She gently closed the door behind her and headed home, her mind in turmoil.

* * *

><p>I hope to explore more of Stoick's issues in later chapters.

In the previous chapter, Hiccup has several thoughts about aspects of religion and religious beliefs. A concerned reader pointed out that some might get offended by that. I felt that Hiccup, who has the very analytical mind an inventor needs, would inevitably start picking at bits of the lore which didn't make sense to him. Hiccup is a Danish Viking. He believes in the Nordic gods and Nordic traditions. He is neither a Christian, nor a Muslim. Given his own background, he would probably consider the myths and trappings of those other religions to be ridiculous in a benign way. In fact he'd probably identify best with the Greeks, the Romans, and the Egyptians. All three of those races had similar pantheons of gods from which they drew many different individual myths as opposed to one overarching story. These structural differences would I think make Christianity appear rather ridiculous.

I tried to write it as I thought it would happen.

**To those of you craving the reunion, I beg you, exercise patience. It will come, and things will pick up in the next few chapters. A major problem I've found with most Wandering!Hiccup stories is that they always seem to skip the Wandering, thus negating all dramatic tension in the return. Only one writer in this fandom has actually managed to pull that off, and I hate to say it but none of us are going to match Midoriko-Sama's 'Becoming' trilogy. **

I'm going to do an experiment here.

I've begun annotating this story to mark the relevant passages between the text and the notes below. I'll be including little factoids and broader historical context for what's happening inside the story itself. If you're interested, give it a read. If not, feel free to skip right by it. Let me know if you'd like them to continue, though.

Prodigal Son 8

The port of Eskendereyya was bustling with activity. Sailors, soldiers, traders and fisherman marched, walked, and ran from dock to dock, many of them transporting various goods back and forth in the cool, clear morning air. Hiccup was at times forced to dodge cartloads of fish, meat, and grain. A line of crewman were passing crated chickens down carefully off of a larger freighter, forming a chain from the dock up to a large farming cart which was no doubt headed to the city's busy marketplace. They were forced to stand aside as an entire herd of goats passed by.

Hiccup drank it all in with joy and wonder. He loved the docks; it was one of the places he felt that he'd found civilization at its height. The city could be viewed as a sort ofâ€¢ imprint. Like a lake which all the rivers ran towards, it warped the landscape and industry around it. How many farmers for miles and miles in all directions worked every day to feed it? How many fisherman? How many artisans and engineers? Eskendereyya pulled in resources from all of Egypt and the Mediterranean, and beyond them to Arabia and Asia. It pulled in raw materials and gave out plays and writing and complex machines, and new ideasâ€¢ It was a giant mechanism all its own, of which the residents were only a small part. The machine of civilization.

He looked down at his wheelbarrow full of the brand new pulleys, and felt proud he was contributing to it.

Anton Pandev's boat was tied up at the poorer docks at the far end of the Port. His daughter Shahira was on the deck, pulling down the mainsail and fastening it to the boom. She heard the rattle of the wheelbarrow down the length of the dock, and smiled at Hiccup as he approached, but she didn't stop working. She was dressed in a light tunic and a sheep's wool vest, along with leather leggings. Comfortable, practical clothes for a hard day's laboring. It reminded Hiccup of Astrid's habit of always appearing in armor no matter the occasion. Practical always had impressed him more far than decorative.

"How's your nose?" she called out.

"Still sore. Thanks for the reminder."

As he approached, Anton Pandev exited the forward hold, clambering up a steep ladder and into the light of day. He was followed by a bearded, stern-looking guard wearing a red cape, a studded, and stained leather cuirass, and a rather dented conical helmet. The soldier slipped a thin package under his cape as he strode confidently off the boat. Hiccup gave him a polite nod and stepped aside. It didn't do to cause trouble for guardsmen; they remembered faces.

"Hiccup!" Anton exclaimed merrily. The Fisherman threw his arms open in greeting. "Welcome to the Pandev family's little slice of heaven!"

"Good to see you again!" Hiccup replied as the fisherman stepped onto the dock. "Who was that?"

"Just one of the port guardsmen. He wanted to take a look at our docking papers."

"And the package you gave him?"

Anton grimaced, "As I said, he wanted to have a 'look' at our paperwork. Docking and administration fees are collected by the guards."

"Isn't that more the job of the treasury's collectors?" Hiccup asked, frowning.

Anton gritted his teeth. "Ah. You must be thinking of the Government's docking and administration fees."

Hiccup bit his lip, glaring down the dock at the retreating figure. "That's immoral."

"It's a part of life."

"It's racketeering!"

"Look around you." Anton gestured at the surrounding ships. "Every day a couple hundred fisherman land here to sell our goods at the markets. And every day they buy our product. We always have a market here. We're never turned away. More importantly, Hiccup, this is the only area of the Mediterranean which the Moorish pirates can't touch. And the guards know it."

"It's blind robbery!"

"It's life, Hiccup. We live inâ€| interesting times. Now, what have you got for me?"

Hiccup sighed and shook his head as the distant guard disappeared into the crowds which thronged the quay. He reached down and threw the wheelbarrow's covering aside.

Anton stared in silence at the pile of newly redesigned pulleys. With an expression nearing wonder, he carefully reached down and pulled one out, giving it a gentle spin. Hiccup felt burst of pride as it clicked away, spinning evenly and effortlessly.

"What in god's name have you doneâ€|?" The fisherman murmured, stroking his moustache.

"I put wheels inside the pulley." Hiccup said proudly.

"If you say so. Those look like marbles to meâ€|"

"They'll work."

Anton gave the pulley another spin, and then set it carefully down on the cart. "Alright, Master Hiccup."

"Haddock. Hiccup Haddock."

"Haddâ€| really? Haddock? Hiccup Haddock?" The fisherman's brows rose. On the deck not four feet away, Shahira was snickering as she coiled a rope and stowed it away.

"Yeahâ€| that was my dad's fault." Hiccup said, blushing. "He named me."

"And you kept it." Shahira said, skipping easily off the boat and onto the deck. "Scandinavia's months and months north of here. You could have taken any name you pleased and you kept 'Hiccup Haddock'." She reached down and examined one of the pulleys.

"Here in Eskendereyya at least." Hiccup said. "How do you know where Scandinavia is?"

She shot him a smirk over the pulley she was toying with.
"Surprised?"

"Impressed." Hiccup corrected, smirking right back. "I didn't really know that world geography would be of interest to a fishermanâ€|"

"There are free lectures in the Agora almost every night. Poets, philosophers, astronomers, alchemists, mathematiciansâ€|" she glanced down at the pulley. "Looks to me like you'd fit right in with that crowd. I hope Yanick pays you well."

"Free lectures?" Hiccup asked eagerly. Reading books in the Library was one thing, but to speak to actual mathematicians and philosophersâ€| _that_ was something else entirely!

"Didn't know about them?" Shahira sighed. "I'm not surprised. They've kinda gone underground."

"Speaking of paymentâ€|" Anton reached into his money pouch.

"Actually I wasâ€| I was hoping I could take away a basket of fish." Hiccup tried awkwardly.

The fisherman's hand stayed fixed in his pocket as he stared at the young man. "Fish?"

"A basket please."

"What are you going to do with a basket full of _fish?_" Shahira asked incredulously.

"Take it to the library." Hiccup replied, feeling his cheeks grow red.

Shahira laughed. "And teach them to read?"

"Possibly. You don't know they can't."

"Any particular type?" Anton probed.

"Haddock, for instance." Shahira suggested with a sly smile. She set the pulley down in the wheelbarrow.

"If you can manage." Hiccup said dryly. "I was actually hoping to set up a more permanent arrangement. I'll fix things, and help you guys out in return for a steady supply."

"I dunno how steady that work's going to be." Anton said thoughtfully. "But I can give you a basket now if you'd like. And I'll let you know if we have any more problems."

"Can I pick it up this evening?"

"I suppose."

Shahira's arm slipped through Hiccup's elbow as the woman came up to stand beside him. "He'll grab it when he drops me off tonight."

"Dwaa?" Hiccup inquired politely, staring at her. He suddenly felt extremely self-conscious, and he didn't dare look Anton in the eye.

She snickered. "Well said. There's a lecture on in the Agora later today, and there's no way you're not going to come with me to see it."

At that moment a nervous young man in a dirty robe brushed past them and approached Anton. He was carrying a bundle of scrolls under his arm which the fisherman carefully removed and placed in an empty barrel on the dock. Anton pulled another money pouch from his pocket and handed it to the visitor, who turned to leave.

With a shock, hiccup recognized him as the Scribe from the previous night. The very same man who had tripped over the marbles and given Hiccup the idea for his new pulleys. He smiled at the man. "I know you. Maps, right?"

The surly scribe fixed him with a wide-eyed, apprehensive look.

"What's your name?"

"My business is my own, stranger." The man snarled peevishly. He hurried away, keeping his head down.

"I'm glad we had this talk." Hiccup called after him. He turned back to Anton. "The thing I love most about his city is the sense of community!"

The fisherman was laughing. "Pontius is aâ€| wellâ€|"

"He's a hopeless grouch." Shahira elaborated.

"But his maps are first-class." Anton said. "Decent star charts are worth their weight in gold."

Shahira gave him a sidelong look. "How did you know about the

maps?"

"I saw him last night." Hiccup explained. "He tripped on some marbles. He actually gave me the idea for the pulleys"

Anton stroked his beard. "Small world."

"Apparently."

"C'mon, Hiccup." Shahira tugged on his arm. "We've got things to do and we're losing daylight."

Anton sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, turning away from them.

Hiccup smiled at her. "What did you have in mind?"

* * *

><p>In the Agora, a tent had been set up. It was made of extremely thick, heavy cloth, and was held up with bulks of timber. A dozen locals were lined up outside it, waiting patiently. Even as Hiccup and Shahira approached, two locals exited the tent, discussing what they had just seen with subdued, yet wondrous tones.</p>

"A camera obscura!" Hiccup exclaimed excitedly.

"You know about them?" Shahira asked. She took a bite out of her fried fish. [1]

Hiccup nodded excitedly. "Saw one in Jerusalem." He joined the short line to enter the tent.

Shahira followed, her eyes suddenly alight with excitement. "You were in Jerusalem?"

"For a few months. It's beautiful there!" his face fell as he remembered the riots and turmoil. "Thoughâ€¦ it's not a stable place."

"My father says we're going there one day." Shahira told him eagerly. "He says the keystone of the world is there."

"It's the The Dome of the Rock." Hiccup nodded. "It's beautiful. And the temple is over two hundred years old but it feels like the newest building in the city."

"Did you see the foundation Stone itself?"

"Yeah. I cried." He admitted quietly. "You realize you're at the center of the world. Just what it means to be standing thereâ€¦"

"I bet it's incredible." She said dreamily.

"It is! I have this theory that the further you are from the Stone, the colder the world is! I mean Scandinavia is miles and miles away, and it's really, really cold over there. But I'd need to travel that far in the every direction to find out."

She gave him a sidelong look. "What is your home called?"

Hiccup grimaced. "Berk. It's in an archipelago on the northern edge of Scandinavia."

She took another thoughtful bite. "That is pretty far. What's it like there?"

"It was absolutely lovely."

"Do I detect a hint of sarcasm?"

"Perhaps a carefully measured pinch or two." He allowed.

"A well-seasoned statement topped with a slice of bitterness." she studied him. "Sore subject."

"A bit."

"Well what about afterwards? You spent some time in Jerusalem."

"Went to the Isles of Britain first. Then down south. Ended up fleeing the Moors in the Iberian Peninsula[2]." Thankfully their hails of arrows hadn't been able to fly as high, or as quickly as Toothless. "I ended up in Byzantium for a while, working as a member of the Varangians[3]. My unit was dispatched to fight the Bulgarians."

"Didn't we lose?"

"The first battle." Hiccup winced bitterly. All that useless slaughterâ€| wading through those bloodsoaked battlefields were some of his worst memories. He sighed and absentmindedly rubbed the scar which ran across his chest. The axe had cut deep, scraping his ribs. If Toothless hadn't plucked him off the battlefield, he probably would have died there.

He said, "I finally got back to Byzantium and hadn't been there a week before I was ordered to break into churches and confiscate or destroy all their sacred objects[4]."

Shahira stared. "What? Why?"

"Because orders." He replied shortly, "I quit and ran."

"Well yeah, butâ€| what good would destroying holy objects do? Isn't that sacrilege?"

"I have no idea and I don't really care to know. It was probably as pointless and stupid as all my other orders." He said, a shade coldly.

Shahira threw up her hands and turned away. "Alright, sorry!"

"I don't mean toâ€|" Hiccup grabbed her hands as gently as he dared, and spun her back around. They were nearly at the tent, and hiccup was looking forward to the strange sight he knew awaited them inside it. Shahira was looking up at him with doleful brown eyes. He felt a twinge of regret. He hadn't intended to put her off or hurt her feelings. "I'm sorry for that. I just don't really like a lot of what

happened. The world is a big place, and it's pretty crazy. That's why I'm here now. I'm trying to put all that behind me and start again, alright?"

"As a blacksmith?"

Hiccup smiled. "I have the skills. Might as well use them. I'm no soldier, Shahira. I can't just follow orders."

She examined his resolute features for a moment, then gave in and smiled back. "You think too much."

"Better than thinking too little."

"Hey!" the man at the tent's entrance waved at them. "You two want in?"

Hiccup placed a few coins in his palm. Still gripping her by the hand, he led Shahira through the tent's open flap, and into the darkness beyond.

A wooden panel had been incorporated into one wall of the tent. In it was a hole, barely larger than a pinprick. Yet the light streamed through it, and on the opposite wall was an image. A moving painting, upside down and reversed, yet still decipherable. It was an image of the street scene outside the tent, changing in real time.[5]

Carts passed by, their rattling muffled by the thick cloth walls, yet Hiccup and Shahira could see their wheels turning against the white canvas on the tent's far wall. People flowed across the canvas, some carrying baskets, or pushing barrows in front of them. A series of guardsmen marched past, their armor clanking in rhythm with the image.

Hiccup took a seat, cross-legged on the sand. Shahira followed, and laid her head on his shoulder as they both watched the moving image.

"Why do you think it does that?"

"I don't know." Hiccup admitted. "But I've always wonderedâ€|"

* * *

><p>[1] Deep frying went back as far as the fourth century, as demonstrated in the ancient roman cook book Apicius. Indeed, the cooking method of frying is actually thought to have been invented in Egypt some twenty-five thousand years BC. That's roughly 4,500 years ago. Whether or not the frying techniques invented included deep frying, it's up for debate. Long story short, French Fries (Or Chips if you're AustralianBritish) were invented **_*before*_** McDonalds.**

**[2] Spain was invaded by, and at war with Muslims for quite a lot of the middle ages. The Reconquista (711-1492), was the opening salvo of the crusades. A ridiculously stupid series of wars during which the Christians tried repeatedly to retake the holy land from the Muslims. The first invasion was actually an attempt to save Constantinople, the eastern capital of Christendom, from a supposed attack. Yet when the rescuers arrived, the citizens of Constantinople

assumed they were there to take the city, and promptly shut the gates. The Rescuers took this rather badly, and laid siege to the city. It resulted in one of the biggest, stupidest mistakes in Military history.**

Later waves actually managed to make it down to Jerusalem to fight the enemy (a novel concept). Nothing actually lasted. They kept running out of supplies and manpower. It takes a lot longer to march an army across Europe and south to Jerusalem than it does to simply give weapons to the people living there.

**[3] An anonymous reader suggested I work Hiccup in as a member of the Varangian Guard. This is a fantastic idea and I'm going to do it. The Varangians served the Byzantine Empire for an enormous chunk of medieval history, but they started out as Vikings who had settled instead of raiding, and they earned and kept a reputation as an elite group of effective, professional, and totally fucking badass warriors. They even served as the private Imperial Guardsmen for the Byzantine emperors themselves. **

I hope you'll forgive me but I'm twisting history a little; to my knowledge no Varangian guards were sent west during the Reconquista (the precursor to the crusades). They were more of a force to be reckoned with a century or two after this story takes place. But they were too badass to ignore.

[4] The Byzantine Iconoclast was another historical headscratcher. Religious images were banned and destroyed. The Emperor at the time apparently felt that God punished Christians who worshipped using symbols of Jesus and the Saints. His evidence for this was the loss of a great many battles including the war with the Bulgarians which Hiccup mentioned earlier. So the Emperor ordered all depictions of Jesus and the saints destroyed to appease God.

**[5] The Camera Obscura was a curiosity for ancient peoples. A tent with a very small opening at one end, and a blank wall at the other. The small amount of light which makes it into the tent projects an image on the far wall. An ancient Arabic scientist named Alhazen used it to demonstrate some key aspects about the behavior of light. Those basic concepts are still used today in the design of cameras. They were also the start of a chain of scientific discoveries which has enabled us to predict with certainty on a molecular level, what every visible star across the galaxy is made of. **

On an interesting sidenote, the image projected onto the retina of your eyeball is also actually upside down and backwards. Your brain flips the images you see upright for you. Pretty cool, huh?

A reader asked me to get further into Hiccup's history. I'm not sure how far I'm going to be able to go. After all, this is about his last adventure, and what happens when he gets home. It'll cover the tail end of his journey. But yes, he learned how to fight. I'll likely get more into that in later chapters.

As I said these ending footnotes are an experiment. If you guys like and appreciate the history, I'll see if I can include more of it. If not, let me know. I'll still work to keep the story itself as true to history as a story with dragons can be ;). Either way, let me know.

9. Chapter 9

Prodigal son 9

A pair of hands gripped Astrid's shoulder, shaking her gently. She groaned in protest. The Hofferson hall was still dark, and she could hear the quiet snoring and murmuring of the Hofferson clan sleeping all around her.

"Astrid!" that was her mother's voice. Her shoulders were shaken again, and she forced her tired eyes open, blinking as she adjusted to the darkness. A shadow in a nightgown was hovering over her.

"Astrid, wake up!" her mother whispered again.

She groaned again and drove her palms into her eyes, rubbing them vigorously. Then she sat up in her bed. Beside her, cousin Eerika let out a sleepy protest and buried her head under a straw pillow. Now that Astrid was lacking the warmth of the blankets, the cold air bit her bare skin, and a shiver ran up her spine. She hugged her shoulders.

Her mother, Brunhilda, was standing beside the bed, a blanket wrapped tightly around her.

"Mum?"

"Astrid, Fishlegs is at the door." Brunhilda reported, frowning at her daughter.

Astrid nodded, blinking myopically. "Right. Tell him I'll get dressed."

"Astrid, what is he doing here at this time of night?"

"It's complicated."

Brunhilda's troubled stare followed her daughter as she went through the familiar motions of getting dressed, and gathering her gear.

* * *

><p>As she stepped out the front door of the Hoffersons' hall, Astrid put her hood up, relishing the warmth of the coarse furs. The cold air stung her cheeks, but despite her best efforts, her eyelids still refused to remain open for more than a few seconds at a time.</p>

Fishlegs was standing just a few meters away, waiting patiently, though the twinkle in his eyes betrayed his excitement. He had a pack on his shoulder, and two canteens full of water.

"Fishlegs! You know what time it is?" Astrid stifled a yawn. Gods above, how she wanted to crawl right back into bed! The cold was beginning to seep through the thinner cloth of her leggings, and when she sniffed, it stung her nostrils.

He grinned at her. "Payback."

She blinked and cocked her head. "What? For what?"

"Waking my daughter up in the middle of the night so you could show me a book." He replied. His tone was excited and gleeful, despite the scolding nature of his words.

"Ah. Yeah. Sorry about that."

"Oh, no! No! No!" his grin was widening. "This is great! You'll never guess where it led! Hiccup was brilliant!"

"Yeah." She shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah I'm starting to realize that. Gobber gave me his sketches."

Fishlegs shook his head. "I'm not talking about sketches. Come with me! You have to see this!"

* * *

><p>When the sun finally rose, it found Astrid and Fishlegs deep in the wooded wilderness to the east of their village. The forest floor was covered in dense, green flora. Astrid could feel dozens of fine prickles which had stuck in her pants, and were lightly scratching her with every movement. Through the trees to the north, she could see the orange light of dawn, sparkling on the ocean waves. It threw beams of light through the low mist which shrouded the forest floor. She stepped over a fallen, moss-covered log and paused to take a sip from one of the canteens Fishlegs had brought.</p>

He moved easily through the forest, and he'd brought leather leggings to shield against the brambles which were such an irritant to her. Very little in the natural world could stand against a determined Viking, and though Fishlegs was a far cry from Stoick and Gobber, he was still a mountain of a man. The roots and bramble knots which constantly grasped at Astrid's feet gave way easily to his thick leather boots. Bushes and branches snapped and crunched around him as he tromped easily through the thick vegetation. Behind him he left a wide swath of destruction, and Astrid had found it easiest to simply move in his wake. She had not been this far into the forest in a long time.

"I hear you went to Stoick." He called over his shoulder.

"Yeah. I was hoping to take a look in Hiccup's room. I wanted to see if he had any more sketches."

"And did he?"

She shook her head, then realized that she was behind him, and he would not have seen the gesture. "No. The Chief wouldn't let me up there."

"That's a disappointment, but I can understand his feelings. Don't worry though, this'll solve everything!"

"You still haven't told me where we're going, Fishlegsâ€|"

"We're near Raven's Point." The man called over his shoulder. "At

first I was looking into the sketches, like you, and that got me nowhere."

"So?"

"Soâ€|" he turned back. "I sat down and thought instead. Do you remember the last raid of the season before he disappeared? He knocked over one of the search lamps."

Astrid's brows knitted vague images flashed through her mind; sitting on a water barrel, watching an entire disappointed village at it gathered in a circle around a short, spindly shape, but she couldn't tell one raid from the next; they all seemed to end that way, as she recalled. "He did that kind of thing all the time, Fishlegs."

"True." The man admitted, "But he said he hit a Night Fury."

She gawked. "I don't remember _that_."

"Well he said it." Fishlegs paused at the top of the shallow hill they had been climbing. The man turned, his eyes aglow with excitement, "I remember not believing him."

"How could anyone?"

"But he said it went down just off Raven Point."

Astrid stared. "â€|Which is where you brought me. He actually _hit _one?"

Positively quivering, he nodded and motioned her forward. She clambered up after him and they both stared. Heading southeast off the ocean, was a straight line of broken tree trunks. A trough had been dug into the ground where something heavy had landed and slid for a dozen yards. It was overgrown with bushes, but the narrow depression could still be seen.

"That he hit one was obvious from the start." Fishlegs said quietly as they both took in the sight. His breath condensed in the air as he spoke. "I knew that the moment I saw that drawing in the Book of Dragons. The questions were 'where did it land?', and more importantly, 'what did he do with it?'."

Astrid slid down the steep bank, following the trail. Fishlegs did as well, and they trudged along the trench, their footfalls loud against the frosty soil. The sun had not yet touched this part of the forest, and hoarfrost still clung to the low branches. As they walked, beasts scrambled and slithered away through the undergrowth.

The trench led them straight to what could only be described as a cove. A crater or sinkhole perhaps, which had grown in leaving a wide cylindrical area with sheer rock walls and a relatively flat area. A narrow creek led into a deep, calming pool of water at the center of the cove. It was filled with flickering silver trout. On one side was a grassy knoll, overgrown with weeds and tall, wispy grasses. On the other was split between a moss bed, and a sandy bank, an accumulation of rough silk which had clearly built up when the underground creek was much larger and moved far faster. Footprints wound back and forth across it, and Astrid immediately recognized them as Fishlegs'. A

tree was growing in the far corner. A few fallen boulders dotted the edges of the bowl. Astrid stood at the edge of the cliff face, taking in the picturesque refuge.

"How do you know the dragon landed here?" She asked.

Fishlegs directed her attention to a variety of long, deep scratches all over the rim of the cove. They were unmistakably made by dragon claws. "He trapped it here for a time, I think." He said.

"Is there a way in?"

"I found a way in over here." Fishlegs moved along the edge of the cove. He led her to the narrow gully out of which the creek continued its journey to the ocean. They clambered through an even narrower break in the rock face and down into the cove itself. Fishlegs encountered a little trouble with the tightest passages, but he managed to hold his gut in enough to struggle through. Astrid was leading at that point, and found her progress suddenly blocked by an old, rotten shield which had been wedged at chest-height between two boulders.

Clear evidence of Hiccup's visitations. It was a child's shield, and the pattern on the front had faded to the point of indecipherability. She ran her fingers along the rusted metal band which wrapped around the outside of the shield, and gripped the rotted, chewed leather strap at the center, a place in this wilderness where she knew for certain Hiccup's fingers had touched.

"There's more past it." Fishlegs said. She carefully vaulted over it. Fishlegs followed suit gingerly, afraid to touch the object. They tramped along the bank of the pool until they came to a fishnet, also old and rotted yet still very recognizable.

And there was more. A circle of stones denoted an old firepit, and when Astrid dug it up, she found old charcoals. A board had been placed across a few small boulders to form a table, with a stump as a chair. A hammer was found lying under the makeshift desk, along with a few nails.

However the largest evidence of Hiccup's activities was piled behind a few boulders under an overhang at the circular wall of the cove.

Long swaths of leather which had clearly been snacked on by rodents of some sort. Astrid recognized metal pins and rivets and lines of rope. There were iron arches and a series of wooden and metal handles. The constructions looked almost likeâ€œ!

"Saddles." Fishlegs said, approaching her from behind.

"Saddles?" Astrid asked skeptically. "How exactly would he have gotten a horse down here Fishlegs?"

He gawked at her, and then shut his mouth abruptly, biting back a comment. "Think it through, Astrid. He wasn't interested in riding horses."

"Then what? Thenâ€œ! the â€œ_ the dragon?!_" Astrid started to laugh. It was dark humor. It really was. Butâ€œ! Gods! "Fishlegs, listen to

yourself! The unholy offspring of lightning and death itselfâ€| let a twig of a Viking put a saddle on it? _Are you serious?_"

The man was scowling. "It's not funny, Astrid! I think he tried to ride it!"

"Tried? Sure." She sniggered. "For all of the three seconds it took the beast to turn around and bite his idiot head off."

"He was feeding it fish! Look at the net!"

"He was feeding himself fish."

"If it ate him, where are his bones?"

"I don't know. Have you searched for its dung pile?" she sneered.

He crossed his arms defiantly. "Hiccup is alive. He tamed a Night Fury and flew away on it."

"Fine." Astrid threw up her hands, shaking her head. "Let's say he did ride a dragon. Why would he just pick up everything and fly away?"

"Look at how we treated him." Fishlegs said quietly. "Wouldn't you?"

Astrid's arms sagged, and she felt a sudden weight on her shoulders. Everything else aside, that part was true. They both fell into silent contemplation. Years of laughter, contempt, derision and dismissalâ€|

They had not treated him well enough. So badly, in fact, that he had actually downed a Night Fury and told exactly no one. No one would have believed him anyway, and he was clearly smart enough to recognize that.

But it still didn't explain the saddlesâ€|

"You can't ride dragons, Fishlegs."

"Has anyone ever tried, or did we just kill them? We haven't been attacked by a Night Fury since Hiccup took it down." Fishlegs gestured out at the cove. "Do you see it here now? If it could have gone back to their nest, it would have, and it would have come back and attacked us again. Where is it? And where is he?"

Sunlight was creeping down the edge of the cove, and Astrid noticed a drawing, done with black charcoal. It was on the cave surface above the saddles, doodled during a rainy day perhaps.

It depicted a wide, diamond-shaped face with two cat-like eyes and four horns, or ears perhaps, sticking out of the top. The face looked friendly, with wide eyes and a mouth which almost looked as though it were smiling. Even in that simple cave-drawing Hiccup had captured something. A certain innocence and gentleness.

_No one's ever tried beforeâ€| _

But why would they? Every Viking was taught at birth that dragons

were monsters straight from Hel's realm. They were the bogeymen in the closets, and the horrors beneath the beds. They were a threat to everyone's lives. Vicious, heartless, soulless killing machines. How could one be ridden?

With a saddle, obviously. Hiccup had already answered that.

The real question lay in her perceptions. How much had she taken for granted? How many fictions were assumed fact? It was a paradigm of thought. A way of life. That 'Us or Them' mentality which precluded any possibility of cooperation. Dragons were the enemy. They were to be given no quarter, and that was that.

Kill on Sight, as the Good Book said.

Or hide, if you were unfortunate enough to find yourself in the sights of a Night Fury.

Yet Hiccupâ€| had managed to shed all that. He had taken generations of teachings and put them aside to wipe his own slate clean and approach the beasts as new.

Fishlegs was right. According to Viking teachings, the Night Fury would have eaten the boy and flown away to rejoin the other demons and attack again.

Yet there had been no attack since Hiccup's disappearance. Something was responsible for that. Was it possible? Could one tame a dragon?

Astrid tried to imagine the demons as beasts. Mere animals. Even the most vicious wolves had to eat and sleep and bear children. Yet Vikings had managed to breed working dogs. Silent Sven used sheepdogs to corral his flocks. Was the same true of Dragons? They had to eat, otherwise what was the point of stealing Berk's food? Perhaps they slept back at their nest, and laid eggs like reptilesâ€| perhaps. If they were just beastsâ€| if she could just for a moment strip away that demonic background which had informed her perceptions for so longâ€|

She grunted in frustration and took a seat on the nearest boulder, glaring at the saddles. She frowned; there were saddles. More than one. A great many, in fact. Designed and redesigned. If Hiccup had been eaten, he wouldn't have been there to redesign anything. There would be no saddle. Or perhaps one, lying torn and bloodstained in the center of the cove. Not the half-dozen redesigns she was looking at, each one building on the previous; retaining its strengths and eliminating its mistakes.

Astrid sat and stared at the saddles, her gaze unfocussed as she forced herself to accept the new reality, fighting against her own preconceptions with the same ferocity she used to confront the demo-the beasts- the animals.

Hiccup Haddock was alive. After all this time, Hiccup Haddock was alive he was alive, and what's more, he had rode a dragon. More than that, a _Night Fury!_ She laughed at the incredulity of it, yet at the same time, she felt herself soar with pride at the accomplishment. A great feeling of relief engulfed her. It was promptly smothered by her guilt, which grew at an astounding rate.

Hiccup Haddock was aliveâ€| and gone.

â€|and she had been among those who had driven him out of house and home.

Hiccup haddock had ignored six hundred years of chaos and slaughter. He had taken all of their notions of violence and war and set them aside to make his own judgments. Wellâ€| if any of them ever could have done it, put aside the entirety of Viking culture, it would have been the one who had never fit in to begin with.

She stared up at the sky, half expecting to hear the whistle, and see a black speck whizzing through the clouds. She wondered what they looked like from the top. How did the gods see Midgard? For just a fraction of a moment, she felt a hint, a light stab of jealousy.

"Astrid?" Fishlegs asked. He had taken a seat on an adjacent boulder, waiting patiently for her to reach the conclusion he had drawn the day before. The inevitable, life-altering, paradigm-changing conclusion. The conclusion which would inevitably lead to the breakdown of everything Berk thought it knew about the world.

"He did it didn't he?" she asked in quiet awe. "He tamed a Night Fury."

"It's why he got so good in the arena-

"-He was learning from an actual dragon. It also explains why he refused to kill any of them." She shook her head, apprehension welling inside of her. The village might one day accept that the beasts could be flown, and that Hiccup Haddock had flown one. Yet once the idea was planted, Astrid knew they would have to rewrite everything they knew. People would start to ask how. They would experiment and try to ride. Everything would change.

And as for their Chief, Hiccup's fatherâ€| Stoick the Vast was a Dragon Killer. The Pride of Berk. He had ended the lives of more beasts than any other. Every weapon he owned had spilled dragon blood. Even one of his spatulas, if the stories were true. Berk's Chieftain had spent his career building the villages' defense, and arming it against the beasts. His nights had been spent slaughtering, and his days repairing. They had eaten his wife, and until this very moment, it was believed they had eaten his child. His hatred of them was absolute, and absolutely beyond question. His authority was also beyond question, and to do so was an act of treason. Therefore riding dragons, seeing them as any/thing but demons was also an act of Treason. It wasn't a hard line of logic to follow, and its end conclusion was horrific; there would be a war. Berk would split in two.

"What are we going to tell the village?"

* * *

><p>With a vocal grunt, Brunhilda lifted up the washing basket and set it on one of the three large beds which took up so much room in the Hofferson hall. She enjoyed the mid-morning. It was one of the few moments when the house was actually empty. An opportunity she took with great enthusiasm. She could relax and think without

interruptions from the sizeable family. She could finish the daily chores, and spend the afternoons cooking and relaxing with the younger children.<p>

She pulled a broom from behind the door and attacked the dirt on the floor with patient determination, cleaning all the nooks and crannies, all the while gently brushing the floorboards for splinters which so often caught in her grandchildren's bare feet at bedtime.

Behind her the door opened, letting in a cold wind which scattered the dust she had swept into a careful pile. She turned to the door, feeling slightly annoyed, but she put it aside as Astrid staggered through and collapsed backwards onto the nearest bed, her hood still up. The young woman let out a long breath as she stared up at the ceiling, her eyes glazed over.

"Astrid?"

"Mum?" she murmured, looking dazed.

"Astrid are you alright?" she took her eldest daughter's hand, examining the younger woman's troubled features, searching for some clue as to what she was thinking. It was to be expected that some children would seek privacy and solitude in a large cramped household. A few of the sons and cousins had moved out and started their own halls. The women took up various positions within the village, jobs and hobbies which gave them some time to themselves. Yet they all still had to come home every day and pile into a bed with up to six other people. With the exception of Brunhilda herself; she and her husband Hoark had their own bed, separated by a thin curtain.

Astrid had found her quiet time in the training arena, and in her own head. Her intensity was still there, but that fiery, passionate girl had grown into a taciturn, solemn young woman who smiled rarely, and almost never laughed at all. It was something Brunhilda regretted. She was proud of her daughter, and prouder still of the choice Astrid had made to take over teaching. It took real courage, after what happened to poor Sluglout.

Berk was in trouble. Everyone could sense it. The soil was giving smaller harvests, the beasts were frightened and sick, and after six hundred years of constant fighting, the dragon raids were finally taking their toll. Everything was in a state of disrepair. No new buildings had been put up in years, and the old ones sported more patchwork repairs than they did original materials. Stoick did what he could, but he was working with limited resources. If things didn't change drastically in a generation or two, the village would eventually fall to the dragon hordes. They would have to pack what they could and move further away. Perhaps they could find a new island, or settle with the Uglythugs or the Meatheads. Either way, Berk was in trouble. Brunhilda considered her daughter one of the few bright lights in an otherwise bleak future, and it was disheartening to see her looking so lostâ€!

She took a seat on the bed beside her daughter, and picked up Astrid's hand, holding it gently in hers. "Astrid, what's happened? Everyone was looking for you this morning. You missed teaching." That was true. Several of the children had stopped in a few hours after

she should have been in class. Whatever the reason for Fishlegs' strange pre-dawn summons, they had interfered with Astrid's regular schedule and left her in a sorry state.

The young woman groaned and drove her palms into her eyes.

"What were you doing out with Fishlegs? You know he's married, right?"

"Mum!" Astrid glared at her.

"There could be talk, Astrid." Brunhilda said, not backing down.
"What in Midgard were the two of you up to?"

"It's complicated." Astrid said shortly. She rolled onto her side away from her mother, staring at the opposite wall.

Intrigued, but upset by this abrupt dismissal, Brunhilda leaned over and rubbed Astrid's back in wide, comforting circles.

"I don't know what to do, mumâ€|" she heard Astrid murmur quietly. "I have a secret, and it might help Berkâ€| but it could also hurt us really badly."

"Can you tell me what it is, dear one?"

"I don't know. I need to think. I don't know what to doâ€| I need to think."

Brunhilda sighed. She was going to have to do some investigating of her own. What kind of information could put Astrid in such a state? She leaned down and kissed her daughter's temple. "Do whatever you think is right, Astrid."

"And what is that?"

"Whatever helps the most people I supposeâ€| Let me make you some honeyed water."

Astrid gathered the fur comforter around herself and let her eyes slide shut. "Thanks mum."

* * *

><p>I wanted to add a slightly tenderer scene. I intend for Astrid's mother to play a larger role in this fic, especially when Hiccup gets back to Berk. The name Brunhilda, as well as some aspects of her character were taken with permission from Midoriko-Sama's Becoming trilogy.

**A reader asked why Hiccup speaks Danish. I'm going to put up a rather pitiful defense of my choice in *calling* it Danish. Yes the language he is speaking is technically Old East Norse (one of three Old Norse dialects), but to others, the Vikings back then were known as Danes. When they took to raiding and piracy, the Danes went Viking. 'Viking' is not a language, nor a people. It is not a noun, it is a verb meaning to raid. Vikings were pirates. One cannot speak Pirate. (Well alrightâ€| Ye can, matey! And yarrr, how awesome it be! But stillâ€| technically not a language.) **

From the perspectives of the people around him, Hiccup is not a Viking, he is a Dane. One could argue that he's one of the Norsemen, but that's just a fancy way of saying 'north men'.

**From his perspective, he might call it Norse, and indeed the different dialects were indistinguishable to the point of being the same (Scandinavian languages still are). But I thought that characters like Yanick would call it and think of it as Danish, since it's spoken by Danes. Especially when he might not know that much about Hiccup's society and culture. I was just trying to maintain internal consistency. Not sure I managed, butâ€œ! **

I should just make everyone in this story speak pirate. How awesome would that be? Yarr! Avast me hearties! Walk the plank!

Next chapter expect a new character which will direct Hiccup's actions for the rest of this story.

**As always, thoughts, comments, and criticisms are always appreciated. **

10. Chapter 10

Prodigal Son 10

Late in the afternoon, Hiccup and Shahira were touring the Agora. Soapboxes had been placed every few yards, each one supporting a speaker. The lecturers ranged in tone from religious piety to deranged ranting. They stood in the hot sun, waving their arms and shrieking to the heavens whatever inane idea happened to pass through their brains. Each one had a crowd of devoted listeners, whether seeking entertainment or enlightenment.

"Soâ€œ! these free lecturesâ€œ!" he grinned at her, "is it going to be one of those guys?"

Shahira giggled. "No!"

"How about him?" Hiccup pointed at a tall, frazzled lunatic who was pressing his hands into a box of hot coals, and screaming up at his god to save him.

"Take a guess!"

"Alright." Hiccup said slyly, eyeing his options, "Well if it's not him, it's definitely that guy!" he pointed at another idiot who was embroiled in a heated philosophical debate with a sheep he had tethered to his soapbox.

"Shut. Up. It's none of these loons!"

"What, you don't want to seek eternal enlightenment through snake venom and hashish?" They stood aside as a guard cart trundled past, filled with prisoners peeking out through iron bars.

"That is not what hashish does."

"Oh you know, do you?"

"I'veâ€| experimented. On occasion."

"Little Miss Debauchery."

"Quiet, you. And don't tell my dad."

"I won'tâ€| he grinned. "For a price."

Shahira whirled around, her expression caught between bemusement and outrage. "What price, exactly?"

"A bucket of fish."

Her jaw dropped, and she began to laugh. "Wow. I totally thought you were going somewhere else with that. What is it with you and fish?"

Hiccup rubbed the back of his neck. "I uhâ€| have a debt to pay. Let's leave it at that."

She gave him an incredulous, searching look, and then shook her head. "Alright, mystery man." She led him down an alleyway to a rather unremarkable wooden door, set in an arched sandstone wall. On the other side, he could hear a woman's voice speaking loudly though he couldn't make out the words.

Shahira flashed him a brilliant smile as she opened the door. "You're going to love this!"

* * *

><p>The room inside was a small U-shaped amphitheatre several rows high. Light streamed in from lattice windows high above their heads, illuminating the sand-covered floor. At the centre of the oval room was a low stone table with several objects including a cone which had been sliced into very careful sections, and a strange device which looked rather like a tree, with each of the six thin branches ending in a small sphere, and a larger orb atop the central spire. Several of the smaller orbs had their own small branch with its own sphere. It was one of the stranger contraptions Hiccup had seen in his travels, and he wondered what on earth it was.</p>

The room was populated. Two-dozen inquisitive faces had turned towards the open door, examining the classroom's visitors. Young people from every walk of life were seated on the semi-circle of benches. An older woman, perhaps in her fourth decade, was standing behind the table. Her hair was tied in an elegant knot atop her head, and she was wearing the silk robes and jewellery of a noblewoman. However her most striking feature was her welcoming smile. "Shahira! Welcome back! How was your fishing expedition?" her voice was sharp, and surprisingly clear. Her accent and clear elocution betrayed a classical education.

"We ran into some trouble, thanks Ma'am." The young woman said. "But father and I made it out."

"No damage, I hope." The noblewoman replied.

"Broken rigging which this man fixed." Shahira said. To Hiccup's amazement, she produced one of his pulleys and tossed it across the

room. The noblewoman caught it with an unerring hand and held it up, examining his workmanship.

"How did you?" Hiccup hissed.

Shahira shrugged. "Quick fingers."

The Noblewoman gave his creation and experimental spin, watching the bearings as they turned in their housing. "What is this?"

"A new type of pulley." Hiccup supplied nervously. "I put a set of wheels in it to reduce friction and help deal with load distribution. That way next time Shahira gets caught by pirates, her pulleys won't jam, and her rigging won't snap." He rubbed the back of his neck. "They asked me to just repair the pulleys, but I wanted to do better. It was just a thought!"

The woman raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "My pupils and I discussed the mechanical attributes of circles not two weeks ago" she addressed the seated crowd. "Is that not correct?"

"Yes Artemisia." Her students replied dutifully.

She handed the pulley to her nearest student, and it was passed around the classroom. "Take careful note! What you're witnessing is the principles of geometry and natural philosophy applied on a practical level to improve and perhaps save lives, as it did your classmate, Miss Pandev. This is why we learn. Tonight I want you all to go home, find a problem like this man did, and a solution for it. When we next convene you will present your findings to your fellow students."

She looked up at Hiccup. "And you. Who taught you?"

"No one." He said awkwardly. "I just kinda know well I mean I work in a forge, but I haven't been taught really. I just thought of it. Sorry."

"Sorry?" the teacher raised an eyebrow. "Never be sorry for a new idea! It's something to be proud of! What is your name?"

Despite his elation that someone so heartily approved of one of his insane ideas, Hiccup gritted his teeth. He'd been dreading this part. "Hiccup Haddock."

Sure enough, a few of the students tittered, but the teacher herself did not bat an eye. "You're not from around here. Why did you come to this city, Hiccup?"

"Because I want to learn about the world." He answered. It was as honest an answer as he had ever given. "Maybe I find my place in it." It wasn't why he left Berk, but when he'd landed atop the Pharos Lighthouse, he'd sensed something in the sprawling coastal city. He was at the heart of civilisation, and as far from Berk's stubbornness as he could get. It was a place of fluidity. A place of change. A place of learning.

Artemisia nodded understandingly. "In the local languages, this city is called Eskendereyya. Or Iskenderun. But when I was young, I learned of it as Alexandria. Founded by Alexander the Great, student

of the philosopher Aristotle, and conqueror of the known world. He built this city to house the greatest, and most inquisitive minds in his empire, and he gave us the Great Library to house, protect, and build upon all human knowledge. This city was built for the research, investigation, and application of natural philosophy." Artemisia spread her arms. "To someone with your ingenuity, there is only one thing I can say: Alexandria was built for you. Welcome home. Have a seat."

Feeling slightly overwhelmed, Hiccup glanced at Shahira, but she had already plopped herself down on one of the benches. She gave him an encouraging smile and shuffled over to make room for him. A few of the students gave him nods and smiles, and he settled down beside her.

Artemisia stepped forward. "I have two rules in my classroom, Hiccup. One: Keep an Open Mind, and two: Make an Effort. My lessons are of no use to the lazy, or the wilfully ignorant."

"I will." Hiccup promised.

Satisfied, she addressed the class at large, "Today we're going to be discussing the world. Its size and shape, specifically. What shape is the world?"

"Flat." One dark-haired student piped up immediately. "The Bible says so."

"Does it, Linus?" Artemisia asked, bemused. "And on whose authority does it make such a claim?"

Her student gawked at her. "God's authority. He built it."

"Did he now? Alright." The teacher rubbed her chin. "If the earth is flat and the sun, moon and stars circle it, then does it stand to reason that the night sky is the same anywhere upon it?"

"It does." Linus agreed carefully, edging his way forward in the manner of an animal caught in a field full of bear traps.

Artemisia smiled. "Has anyone here done extensive traveling?"

"Hiccup has." Shahira said immediately.

"Thanks." He mumbled as all eyes turned to him.

"How far, Hiccup?" the Teacher asked.

"Scandinavia to here, and a lot in betweenâ€|" he told them. A murmur passed through the crowd. It was an enormous distance even the most avid travellers in the area rarely left the shores of the Mediterranean. He was receiving even more curious looks than he had been before.

Artemisia, however, looked unfazed. "And in your travels, did you at all happen to observe the stars?"

Hiccup nodded. He and Toothless had travelled by night, especially in the more densely populated areas. The night sky and its mysteries

were a sight he was all too familiar with. He addressed Linus. The young man was glaring at him, his lips forming a very thin white line as he kept himself restrained.

Hiccup said, "They change. Sometimes you'll look up and you'll realize there are new ones up in the south, and the ones in the north have vanished. Some change location, or they're upside down." He frowned. "None of the constellations seem to get any smaller though. You'd think they would if you were getting further away from themâ€|"

"So they wouldâ€| unless they were of immense size, and a fair distance away. After all, mountains often do not appear to change in size unless an extraordinary expedition is undertaken." She addressed the class at large. "But there is more evidence which contradicts the commoners' flat-earth theory: no matter the vantage point, the shadow of the earth during a solar eclipse is always circular. This fact has been recorded by Astrologists throughout the civilised world."

"But the earth is flat and round. During an eclipse, the sun is below the earth, and the moon above." Linus argued. "That the shadow appears round makes sense."

"Yet when an eclipse occurs nears the horizon, at dawn or dusk, would it not appear elliptical?" Artemisia asked. "Flat cylinders make all manner of shapes, Linus. A perfect sphere makes only one."

"Then why do we not fall from the sides if it is a sphere?" Linus argued, "Why do we not slide away?"

"If it is large enough, a curved surface could act as a flat one for all intents and purposes." Another student piped up.

Hiccup raised a hesitant hand.

Artemisia pointed to him. "Yes?"

"Whether it's flat or not, all objects seek the ground, right?" He asked. "We know that. Whatever the Gods did to make that happen, whatever they put underneath the world, could they not put that inside a sphere and have us walk around the outside of it?" It was an intriguing thought, and one which excited him more and more. He could fly all around the world. He could start at Eskendereyya, fly all the way past Berk, and end up in southern Egypt! How insane was the universe? And what of Yggdrasil, the world tree? Did the earth hang from it like a fruit? Hiccup had always thought that the realm of Midgard was supported by its branches, but perhaps it hung instead.

Perhaps the stem of the world wasn't too far from Berk- he shut his eyes, pushing the island from his thoughts.

Artemisia was in a discussion with Linus. "One of the rules of natural philosophy: Nothing should be viewed as infallible. Not even the bible."

"Well then the round-earthers you're quoting might well be." Linus argued.

"Perhaps." Artemisia agreed, "But observation supports their position

more than God's. How you choose to account for this discrepancy is entirely up to you, but in this classroom, observable facts matter more than rhetoric. The fact is that not only has it been proven that the earth is round, but we actually know how big it is." This pronouncement was greeted with silence. Even Linus had gone quiet. It was a lofty declaration, to know exactly how large the world was. It was knowing the limits of the Gods' powers.

"Is that right?" a sceptical student asked.

Artemisia nodded. "The circumference of the earth is forty thousand kilometres. Its diameter is about thirteen thousand kilometres. I ask you all, how is this possible? How can we know this?"

"You had someone pace it?"

The classroom rang with laughter. Hiccup and Shahira both joined in.

"Try again." Artemisia challenged.

Silence grew as everyone paused to consider an answer.

"Geometry." One young woman suggested.

"Geometry." Artemisia agreed, smiling. "Mathematics is the language of the gods, and with due respect to Linus here, the rules of geometry are their laws." From behind the table, the teacher pulled out a walking stick. She began to pace the length of the amphitheatre, and as she walked, she spoke. "Any human can kill, against the wishes of Gods. We can steal, we can threaten, and we can break all of our oaths!" She stopped and traced out a near-perfect circle in the sandy floor of the amphitheatre, "But on a flat plane, a triangle whose angles add up to anything other than one hundred and eighty degrees is impossible. A sphere cannot cast a shadow other than a circle. The whole is greater than the part. Things that are equal to the same thing are equal to one another. Any line drawn in a direct path from one point to another will always be straight. Euclid, Pythagoras, Aristotle, Archimedes—" she planted her staff in the ground at the centre of the circle, "-Through their studies of mathematics, these men conversed with God. As did another named Eratosthenes. He was the head librarian of Alexandria and it is he who calculated the size of the earth."

"That doesn't answer how." One red-haired student said impatiently.

"Alexius, I am getting there. I promise." Artemisia replied. The student named Alexius saw back and crossed his arms. He grew red-faced as he was serenaded by his chuckling classmates.

Artemisia addressed the class. "As I have said many times before, Knowledge, when acquired through the application of the principles of natural philosophy, is a pyramid. Eratosthenes paid great heed to the Philosophers who came before him, and the observations of Astrologists. He took particular note of a report from the city of Cyrene. A well has been dug there, the bottom of which lies in darkness every day of the year with the exception of noon on the summer solstice, during which time the sun is directly overhead, and light strikes its waters."

Artemisia added a line to the circle she had drawn, leading from its edge a few inches towards its centre, obviously representing the well at Cyrene.

"This is important, because here in Alexandria, at noon of the summer solstice, the bottoms of our wells are in shadow. Yet an hour later, they are alight and the well of Cyrene is in darkness." She added a second line, representing the well at Eskendereyya.

"The sun had moved position in the sky." Linus said. "That is not proof of a spherical Earth! When a candle is moved across a flat table, the shadows of objects on that table change."

"True. But the candle is close to the table. The sun is not close to the earth. Archimedes reckoned the distance between us and the sun to be ten thousand times the earth's radius. Aristarchus of Samos reckoned it to be twice that. By Eratosthenes calculations it is one hundred and fifty million kilometres away."

"That's insane!" Hiccup blurted out, unable to contain himself. Linus looked relieved at finally having found an ally.

Artemisia didn't miss a beat. "It is geometry, Master Haddock. It is calculated with mathematics, the language of Gods."

"But after a few meters we can't feel the heat of a candle. From a few blocks away, one can barely see its light." Hiccup argued. "Yet the heat and light of the sun is still felt here. How can it be so far away?"

"Distance and size alone should not be impressive." the teacher smirked. "But yes. The sun is an extraordinary thing! How bright it must be up close! Enough to instantly blind us! And how hot it must feel! A heat beyond reason or imagination! I wonder how large it is. After all, while we may lose sight of a candle, the great furnace of our city's lighthouse can be seen several kilometres into the open sea. The torches and candles of this city are collectively bright enough to wipe the stars from the skies. Is the Sun perhaps as large as a city? As concentrated a light as Pharos' furnace? If it is such a beacon, I wonder who stokes its fire."

"The gods." Alexius said. There was a murmur of agreement.

"Regardless, Eratosthenes drew these same lines that I have on the floor. He connected them at the circle's centre—" as she did "-And that gave him an angle which he used a sundial and basic rules of geometry to find. That angle turned out to be one fiftieth of a circle's circumference. From various surveying trips between Cyrene and Alexandria, he already knew length of the curve between his two cities. From here the steps to calculate the earth's circumference were all too easy. Easy enough, in fact, that we're going to calculate them again today."

She crossed back behind her table and produced handfuls of chalk tablets and abacuses, which were handed out amongst the class. Charts full of surveyor data were laid upon the table alongside diagrams which showed the same sundial reading Eratosthenes had taken.

Artemisia continued speaking as the various devices were handed out. She said, "No conclusion in Natural Philosophy should be taken as fact unless it can be proven and reproven repeatedly by anyone who wishes to do so. Faith can teach you many things, but here in this classroom, we deal with what we can observe and understand with our own eyes."

* * *

><p>Hours had gone by. Hiccup had followed the math as best he could. Early in life he had learned Sums, as his father called them. Basic arithmetic. Enough to calculate what food they would need to survive Berk's harsh winters. If it took five pounds of wheat to make a small loaf of bread, how many people could seven hundred pounds feed? If it took a family of five two days to eat a loaf, how long would those seven hundred pounds last? Basic, practical calculations needed every day to see that the town's stores were full, and its citizens satisfied.</p>

Yet this Geometry was something different. As Artemisia said, it was divining the rules of the gods. These perfect shapes; lines, circles, triangles, and squaresâ€| the way they interacted with one another opened the universe to him! Artemisia had taken him aside for a small private lesson on Trigonometry, or the calculation of angles. Hiccup was proud to say that within minutes he was able to re-join the class. He even lent Shahira a hand as she was struggling with the angle calculations.

All too quickly the lesson ended, and the class filed out, each student wishing their teacher a fond farewell. Lessons took place three times a week, at midday. Hiccup found himself planning ways to escape the forge so that he could attend.

Midgard was but one world on the branches of Yggdrasil. Its magic and laws ruled what happened upon and between each realm. But being able to calculate and extrapolate and predict facts of the natural world with certaintyâ€| the possibilities it opened up were vast. Even if it had all been caused by magic, and was perhaps held together by it, how much of the world, and human suffering therein could be explained with Natural Philosophy? How much which before had been attributed simply to the will of the gods, could now be explained and understood as a natural occurrence? If everything in reality could be predicted with Mathematics, then perhaps what was before left to chance could be predicted and planned for. Things such as illness and death had always been explained away by demons, curses, and the whims of higher beings. Was there, like the strange observations which had caused philosophers to question the shape of the planet, some other explanation? Natural disasters, the tides, the migrations of animals, the movements of the planets... Why did the sun rise? Why was the sky blue? What were rainbows, and how were they caused?

The thought that these and other questions might have explainable answers was a way of thinking which gave him a feeling of power over, and synchronicity with what Artemisia would have termed 'The Observable World'. After eight years of traveling, he had finally found a place and a purpose: learn. Learn for the sake of understanding the world. Learn because the Truth was something important, even if it did contradict religious and cultural preconceptions.

But he already knew that. It was why he had put a saddle on Toothless instead of killing him. It was why he had left "No! Don't think about it. In that direction lay only bitterness and guilt. He was here now. He was in Alexandria among some of the greatest minds in the world. He was here to learn!

He and Shahira attached themselves to the end of a short line of students which had gathered in front of Artemisia's table. Alexius the skeptic was among them. He was having trouble sorting out an error in his calculations. Within seconds Artemisia had spotted it. She pointed it out to him and, after a few encouraging words, sent him on his way.

A young woman followed, with a question pertaining to a previous class which Hiccup had not attended.

After that came Linus, and he looked quite angry.

"Artemisia!"

"Hello Linus." She said in a bored voice. "Are we going to do this yet again?"

"What you've said in this lesson was blasphemy."

Hiccup raised his eyebrows, surprised at the bluntness of the statement. Artemisia looked considerably less shaken. "As it appears to be with every lesson you attend. And a blasphemy according to whom?"

"My Pastor. He said that disturbers are to be rebuked, objectors confuted, the treacherous guarded against, the contentious restrained, the haughty repressed, litigants pacified, and the evil dealt with." He crossed his arms triumphantly.

"-the unskilled taught, the lazy aroused, the poor relieved, the oppressed liberated, the good approved, the depressed encouraged, the infirm supported, the unskilled taught and all are to be loved." Artemisia finished the quote. Linus gave her a stunned look, and she chuckled. "I have read Saint Augustine's teachings, Linus. If you're going to quote philosophers word for word, then use the entire quote and appreciate all aspects of it. His teachings were not a buffet from which one can pick and choose. And I don't disagree with all he had to say. But I want you to ask questions and think for yourself. The library of Alexandria has seven hundred thousand volumes. Scrolls with writing on every subject imaginable. It is unlikely that any one book possesses the answers to all of our questions. Widen your mind."

"My pastor says we must not fall prey to the mad teachings of witches!"

"Has he met many, then?" Hiccup asked, feeling considerable indignation on Artemisia's behalf.

Linus fixed him with a withering glare. He then turned his attention back to Artemisia. "What you say is impossible! It contradicts the Bible, and the Bible is God's word! You cannot argue with God! He is

all-powerful!"

Artemisia pinched the bridge of her nose. She said, "Linus, in my experience one can argue with anything man imagines. In another three hundred years, your god may be a forgotten relic as so many gods have come and gone before him. At one age, the Roman gods were thought supreme. Before them, the Greeks and the Egyptian's. But during all that time, the square of the hypotenuse was equal to the squares of the other two sides. So it shall continue to be long after all our names are gone from the history books because that is something which is truly outside Man's control."

"How dare you!"

"If your god disagrees with me, let him come down from the sky and strike me dead himself." Artemisia said shortly. "In the meantime I have plenty to do, Linus. I suggest you go back to your church. Clearly nothing taught here will satisfy you."

His jaw jutting out defiantly, Linus turned on his heel and stomped out the door.

Hiccup was amazed. "You'd argue with gods?" he asked as the door closed.

"I would argue with people." The teacher replied calmly. "In my experience the gods keep themselves to themselves. I have no problem with belief in a deity, but to believe all of a religion's teachings instead of what you can see with your own two eyes, instead of what is proven through logic and mathematics and experimental methods of inquiry which produce repeatable resultsâ€ Is to paint oneself a fool. It is the opposite of critical, rational thought and that is something I cannot abide. Not in my own studentsâ€"

"But there must be Gods." Hiccup reasoned. "How else would the world come to be?"

"I'm sure there are."

He took a moment to examine the curiosities which had been laid out on her desk. The strange cone was first. It was beautiful, dark wood object. It had been sliced four times at four different angles.

Artemisia gently pulled the model to pieces for him. The top came off first to reveal a circle, then a section sliced diagonally to create an ellipse. Two more slices revealed a parabola and hyperbola in sequence. Hiccup found himself curious about each shape. What were their relevant equations? How could he use them in a practical, effective way?

"Conical sections." Artemisia said. "Each cut is on a different plane, and reveals a different shape. Apollonius of Perga wrote eight volumes on conical sections. They are an informative read, if a little dry."

He smiled at her, and she smiled back, "I'm glad you're here, Master Haddock. You have a brilliant mind, and I'm looking forward to seeing you put it to use."

"About thatâ€|" He rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. "I'm an apprentice blacksmith with Yanick Erwan. I'm needed at his forge every afternoon."

The teacher was already pulling out a scroll. She unrolled it to reveal a very important-looking government document. She signed and dated a line at the bottom, then rolled it up and handed it to Hiccup. She repeated the process on a second one which she gave to Shahira. "An application for financial compensation for your reduced hours of labour. All he has to do is take it to the treasury. Hiccup, it takes most pupils a few devoted lessons to understand Trigonometric calculations. You learned in minutes. You belong in this classroom. Don't let him pressure you into thinking otherwise."

Hiccup stared down at the document, feeling stunned. "You'd just volunteer money? Just like that?"

Artemisia laughed. "Master Haddock, I told you this city was built for Academics. Some of my students have travelled here all the way from Byzantium. Not all of them could afford it without scholarships. The Government has lots of money available to assist young minds. All you have to prove is that you're worth the cost." She held up his pulley and gave it a spin. "I think you've already done that."

"Thank you." He said numbly, feeling overwhelmed.

"No trouble." She said.

He found his eye wandering over to the strange, tree-like construction he had spotted when he'd first stepped through the classroom door. "What is that thing?"

"Aristarchus' heliocentric model." She answered. "There are some natural philosophers who believe that the earth isn't actually at the centre of the universe."

Hiccup frowned. "And you do?"

She shrugged. "It explains the retrograde motions of the planets just as well as Ptolemy's epicycles. But I keep this one around mostly just to make my students think and ask questions. The Christians claim it's blasphemous, of course. I think every god that was ever worshipped would probably disagree with the theory."

Hiccup kneeled to give the strange cosmic model a closer look. "And you're not afraid of angering them?"

"When I don't even know which one is in charge? Ha. No. Let them kill me, then I'll know whose religion is true and I'll find a way to report the results back for Humanity's benefit." She turned to face him. "And what about you? What do your gods say?"

But Hiccup was bent over, eye-level with his teacher's heliocentric model of the cosmos. He pointed at one of the orbiting spheres.

"That is Mercury," Said Artemisia, "Messenger of the Roman gods."

Hiccup shook his head. He reached out with a long, slender finger and gently pushed the sphere, watching it trace its path around the model. "It is Odin, the Wanderer. He has two ravens, Thought and Memory, which fly far and wide, watching everything and reporting back to him." the heliocentric model squeaked as Hiccup pushed it further, watching the spheres rotate around their central axis. He said, "Odin gave up an eye to sate his thirst for knowledge. He knew that was more than a fair trade."

"And what would you give up in return for knowledge, Hiccup Haddock? In return for a better understanding of the world?"

"I've already given up my home."

Shahira and Artemisia exchanged a glance which Hiccup failed to notice. He was enamoured by the spinning model. "Odin carried Gungnir, a spear taken from the root of Yggdrasil, the world tree, and forged by the dwarves of Nidavellir. The laws which govern the nine worlds were etched on it."

Artemisia listened in patient silence. She said, "World tree?"

Hiccup gestured at the spindly model, with its long, slender stand leading up to the bunch of multiple arms at the top, each one carrying a planet. "Does this not look like a tree to you?"

The teacher raised an eyebrow, and then smiled at him. "It does. Would you like to learn one of the laws which Odin must have etched on that spear?"

He looked up at her, his eyes shining. His heart was pounding with excitement, and he couldn't help but grin back at her. "I want to learn them all."

Artemisia was suddenly alive with motion, feeding off of her student's enthusiasm. She swept across the sandy floor and retrieved her teaching staff. With it, she drew an enormous triangle which stretched across the floor of the empty classroom. "Then let us begin with Euclid and Pythagoras, Hiccup. I am going to teach you the laws of the natural world."

* * *

><p>I'm afraid there are going to be less marked footnotes this time around. This chapter took a while because I wanted to get it right. Let me know what you think.

On the subject of religion, and how it has been portrayed in this fic, the friction between devout believers and those who sought an understanding of the universe through the scientific method is an undeniable aspect of human history. I will not shy away from it.

**Anyways my apologies for how boring this chapter may have been to you, but it was utterly crucial for setting up what happens later. I tried to make the teacher flamboyant enough and enthusiastic enough to be fun. All mathematical principles and laws quoted are real. All historical figures named are real (though Artemisia herself is not),

and all of their accomplishments are real. Men knew the earth was round long before the Christian god ever came to be. Sadly this knowledge was lost and forgotten during the fall of the Roman Empire. It has since been re-proven, though Flat-Earthers still exist to this very day. Facts which today we take for granted, such as the spherical nature of our planet, were hotly debated topics during that time.**

Several readers have asked about Hiccup's religious beliefs. It is true that Christianity was the dominant religion at the time this story takes place. It is true that many of the Vikings converted to Christianity. Some stayed, and some brought it back to Scandinavia with them. Scandinavia was eventually converted, but it took around 200 years before the actual beliefs themselves became accepted socially. We shouldn't discount the power of those old gods. Thor is still worshipped even today. It was not uncommon for Norse men and women to wear both the Hammer and the Cross. Even after the hammer was banned, it was still sold freely in many villages, and private worship was not frowned upon in these communities. Today the Icelandic nations are among the least religious on the planet, and many people are beginning to convert back to the original Pagan Norse culture.

Hiccup believes in the Norse gods for plenty of reasons, his Viking stubbornness being the main one. It also allows some distance between him the events around him as demonstrated in this chapter. It's an unusual perspective. But his beliefs are also going to be altered and changed by the lessons he learns. The Heliocentric model being a sort of metaphor for Yggdrasil is a good example of how I intend to work this angle. Ironically enough I think he'd have an easier time fitting Artemisia's strange ideas into the old mythology than he would if he had converted to Christianity.

**On a side note, I cannot find any evidence which states directly that Vikings thought of Mercury as Odin, but in the pantheon of gods, Odin and Hermes share more characteristics than Odin did with Zeus. Hermes and Odin were both travelers who sought knowledge. Hiccup's identification of the Planet mercury as Odin is meant to showcase his slightly muddled religious views which have been altered by his travels as he fits his understanding of the larger world into what he knew before to be true. This should not be interpreted as a literal Norse belief. **

On to Artemisia herself: She is based on Hypatia, though some of her theories in future chapters will have been stolen directly from Johannes Kepler. I've included her because I wanted a foil for Stoick, as Alexandria is meant to be a foil for Berk.

Hypatia was a prominent scholar, philosopher and teacher in ancient Alexandria. Kepler was a German Astrologer, and the man who mathematically explored and proved the elliptical movement of celestial bodies. Both of them worked from the Greek mathematicians, and it is from that common source material that I intend to draw Artemisia's teachings.

I understand that this story might start to piss off some of the more devout readers. The debate between the factual claims of religion and science has been going on for a long time, and is central to the stories of both Hypatia and Kepler.

Hypatia herself was a mathematician living in Alexandria about 400 years after the crucifixion of Jesus supposedly took place. She was a very intelligent woman, a student of the Greek philosophers, and a very influential figure in ancient Alexandria. Unfortunately she was also embroiled in the dirty politics of the time. A bishop named Cyril wanted her out of the way because she had been supporting his political opponent. He told his congregation that she was practicing witchcraft.

**His congregation pulled Hypatia off the street and into the nearest church (which is still around today). Then they dropped her in front of the cross, beat her with roofing tiles until she was an inch from death, and then used clamshells to flay off her skin. Then they tore off her limbs and burned the remains. **

**Cyril eventually defeated his opponents and went on to be canonized â€“ declared a Saint- by the Church. **

**I'd say his fate is somewhat undeserved. Yet it also serves to keep in mind that Hypatia was murdered because of politics, not religious belief. Her death signaled the end of Alexandria as a center for scientific investigation, and factual understanding of the world. She is often regarded as the last civilized light extinguished before the dark ages began. **

The character of Artemisia is meant to be an echo of that ideal scholarly class of person.

**There is nothing wrong with believing in God, but plenty of damage can be incurred when facts and critical thought are ignored. Hypatia's death is a perfect demonstration of how easy it is to manipulate people who don't ask questions. Spiritual belief should never be mistaken for, or allowed to evolve into blind Zealotry. I'm afraid this will be a theme explored in this section of the story, as it was an issue of the time. **

If that makes you uncomfortable, best leave now.

11. Chapter 11

Violence ahead. Extremely graphic violence. Dragons are enormous, fire breathing creatures, perfectly capable of killing in a number of utterly horrific ways. ***Again, I'm not one to shy away from things. People will hurt dragons in this story. Dragons will hurt people. People will hurt people. Dragons will hurt dragons, and none of it will be kid-friendly.**

The next chapter is going to include a few ugly moments. If you are uncomfortableâ€¦ then I suggest you find a story which is rated 'K', not 'T'. I'd rate it 'M', but I don't intend to put any sex in it. Violence in media, our society can deal with. Sex? Not so much.

* * *

><p>Prodigal Son 11</p>

It was the bells that woke her up, but Astrid knew immediately what was going on. The orange light flickering through her empty hall's open window was a clue, as were the incessant screams, the yelps and

growls of barking dogs, and the furious cries of Berk's warriors. But the most telling clue was the acrid chemical smell which filled and burned her nostrils. Only one thing in the world made that smell: the flammable gel of a Monstrous Nightmare.

In less than a second, she was on her feet, retrieving her axe and marching towards the door. Her father's hunting bow, and a half-full quiver had been hung above it, which she slung over her shoulder. She tore the door open just in time to see gouts of Nightmare's liquid flame shoot from the windows of the Hrolfson hall. The building was aflame with such intense heat that she momentarily shielded her face. She could see nothing in the open windows beyond the roaring furnace, so like Gobber's forge at full heat. She felt her heart leap into her throat; there were over seventeen people in that family... how many of them had been in there?

Three blackened, burning, screaming people leapt out the door and through the windows, rolling on the ground as they tried to choke the flaming gel which coated their backs. Blinded, deafened, and in pain beyond the ability to scream, a tiny body shambled out of the flaming building, arms hanging loosely at its sides and burning from head to toe. That was little Sigerich Hrolfson, no more than seven winters old; one of Astrid's students. A Monstrous Nightmare had murdered one of her studentsâ€¦

The dragon itself, fully ablaze, was perched on the roof, blowing its liquid fire through a hole in the thatch, and watching the Viking family burn. As its youngest victim shambled out, charred nearly beyond recognition, it slithered down with its long neck and scooped the dying child up in its mouth. It took off, Hrolfson hall collapsing beneath it.

Everything she had learned the day before, what Hiccup had discovered; that Dragons were merely animals, things which could be reasoned with... it all flowed from her mind like water through a sieve. Putting her emotions in a box just as her uncle Finn had taught her, Astrid calmly notched an arrow, lead her target, and let fly. The small black arrow flitted into the broiling, smoke-filled sky and hit the Monstrous Nightmare in the wing joint, causing the beast to spasm and roar. The small body fell from its mouth and landed on the ground with a crunch which she also put out of her mind. The dragon went down just a few seconds later, demolishing a shed. It roared loudly. She hoped it was in pain, and there was plenty more she had to offer.

Astrid sprinted towards it, hefting her axe. The creature's long neck wound around and its slitted eyes narrowed as it found her - the source of its sudden pain. She knew what was coming, and she leapt, pushing sideways off a water barrel as its maw opened. An arc of the liquid gel zipped over her left shoulder, spattering a few droplets on her fur collar. The creature snapped at her as she flew towards it. Astrid swung her axe sideways, striking it across the teeth as its jaw snapped shut. Chunks of fang flew in all directions, and it screeched, drawing back in shock and pain.

She landed on her feet amongst the burning wooden planks which had previous held the Hrolfson family's farming tools. The dragon coiled around her as quickly as it could, but Astrid was slightly faster. She swung the axe down, sinking it deep into the monster's neck. It snapped backwards, sending her flying over its spiny, flaming body to

land a few meters away. She rolled onto her back, fighting to get her bearings. The Nightmare twisted around and skittered after her furiously. Blackened smoke rose from the wounds as the dragon's flaming body vaporized the blood which was pouring out.

Her axe was embedded in its neck, but Astrid still had her father's bow. Lying flat on her back, with the Nightmare careening towards her, she notched another arrow. As the Nightmare, with its broken but still deadly fangs, snapped at her, she let loose. The projectile flew straight and true, entering its open jaws, ramming through the roof of its mouth, and ending its journey in the creature's brain.

The dragon flopped to the ground, its long neck twisting like the limb of a ragdoll. Its tail twitched a few times, but it was clearly dead, or wounded beyond its ability to further harm her village. Astrid got to her feet and dropped a few handfuls of dirt on her burning furs to choke the flames. She pried her axe from its muscly neck and began to hack at it until the head rolled and bounced down the hill towards Gobber's forge.

Astrid took a moment to survey the situation. Berk was in flames. Fire poured from several homes, and the night sky was black with towers of smoke. Viking warriors were clustered around the food stores and the entrance to the great hall, where those who couldn't fight were always sent during raids. The sky was rife with a dozen flitting shapes and the air was thick with smoke and death. Her mouth watering despite her disgust, Astrid wondered why the gods had made burning human flesh smell so much like roasting pork.

Outside the forge, Gobber and the Thorston twins (who always fought together) were facing off against a pair of Gronckles. On the hill near the Haddock hall, seven burly Vikings led by Snotlout were wrestling with another Nightmare, its flames extinguished. She could see the towering profile of Stoick the Vast as he crushed a Nadder's skull in with his mighty iron hammer.

Astrid charged down the hill towards the Gronckles, screaming at the top of her lungs. The plaza had some of the most tightly clustered homes around it, an easy target for angry dragons. And with their flailing tails, Gronckles were just as effective at damaging property and people as any Nightmare. Two of the buildings were already burning. Another one had been turned to splinters by one of the dragons' rear ends.

Hearing her approach, a Gronckle turned and coughed out a ball of molten rock, which tumbled towards her at high speed. Astrid dodged it easily enough, and she threw all of her momentum into an axe blow powerful enough to crack the Gronckle's skull. The creature groaned and stumbled sideways. Gobber took the opportunity to thrust a spear through its neck, putting the beast out of its misery. A few meters away, the twins were using their own spears to drive the second Gronckle back and away from the plaza. It took one look at its dead companion and took to the skies. An arrow from an unknown archer in one of the defense towers thumped into its side as it retreated.

Several seconds later a tangled, writhing, bloody mess landed near the forge. Astrid recognized it as a Zippelback, caught in a razorwire net. Flakes of blood, skin and scale landed all around as

it panicked and writhed, cutting itself to pieces. Green gas began to fill the air around it, and was ignited repeatedly as it tried to burn the netting away. The twins immediately went after it, plunging their spears in again and again, stabbing it mercilessly, and celebrating in the carnage.

"Astrid!" Gobber huffed, grabbing her arm, "You're needed at the arena. A few of your young Bairns camped out there and Snorri saw a Zippleback headed their way."

Astrid didn't waste time thanking him. She rushed north towards the arena, dodging through a few alleyways. Recent memories came unbidden, and once again she watched the poor charred wreck of little Sigerich Hrolfson stumble its way out of his family's burning hall. She picked up speed, swearing on Thor's name that she would not let that happen to any more of her students.

* * *

><p>Four hundred meters from the arena's bridge, Astrid found Snorri Sigurdsson, the warrior who had warned Gobber. He lay dead, propped against a tree, and festooned with Nadder spines, blue with green tips. His face beneath his beard was a pale, sickly colour; a sign of the Nadder poison having done its work. Astrid felt a pang of gratitude towards him for attempting to defend her students. Later she would have to thank his family, but at that moment, she was on the hunt. She picked up his shield and continued forwards, listening carefully for the chirping sound which Nadders made.</p>

She reached the bridge not a moment later. The arena had been built a little ways from the town, on a sea stack which sat close to the cliff's edge. A sheer drop on three sides, with a narrow open bridge leading back to the mainland. This was a security measure taken to ensure that, should a dragon escape the arena, it posed as little a threat to the town as possible. The braziers which lay every few meters down its length were out, cutting her visibility. But that wouldn't matter to a dragon; she was horribly, horribly exposed. Especially if that Nadder was still in the area.

On the far side, she could see the wide bulk of a Hideous Zippleback. It was perched on top of the cage, and both heads were inside the arena, presumably snapping at the children therein; Astrid could hear their frightened screams. She slung the shield over top of the bow across her back, hefted her axe, and charged across the bridge. She kept her eyes on the Zippleback, watching its rippling muscles and trying to keep her mind off of how easy it would be for any dragon to swoop past and knock her into the sharp rocks and churning ocean waves two hundred meters below.

She was half way across when she heard it: the chirping noise, followed by a half-dozen little whistling projectiles. Nadder spines peppered the stones around her as she ran. A few thumped into the back of her shield, the force of each blow making her stumble. She thanked Thor that her time off was spent practicing all of those flips and jumps and free-running, as it allowed her to keep her balance when it was so utterly crucial.

She reached the Arena as the Nadder flew around for another pass. Astrid sprinted up the ramps on either side of the arena's entrance, and ran across the wide lattice frame, bounding from strut to rusted

strut. Somewhere above her she could hear the chirping as the Nadder circled, but that didn't matter to her nearly as much as the fact that both the Zippleback's heads were hanging through the gaps in the metal cage, and getting closer and closer to chomping up one of the frightened children beneath. She drew her axe as she reached the Zippleback and brought it down on the one of the creature's necks, lopping its head off. The creature reacted immediately. The dragon's one remaining head withdrew and in a lopsided, ridiculous way. It flapped pathetically towards Berk's forests, crooning in agony as its stump bled out.

This was lost on Astrid, however, as the Nadder circling above her chose that moment to grab her shield in its claws and throw her bodily across the cage. She rolled down the latticework to land painfully near one of the chain winches which were used to open the dragon pen doors. She heard the sound of Nadder flames rapidly approaching, and rolled to the side, just in time to avoid a gout of flame, though it passed close enough to singe her entire left side, and she could smell her own burnt hair. The flames hit one of the winch's chains, and melted a few links. The chain sprang loose with a clang noise, kicking up sparks as it hit the rock.

Astrid caught sight of a blue and green tail pass over her head, its spines protruding in all directions. It banked quickly, and blew a few gouts of fire, corralling and herding her, driving her off the edge of the cliff. Thinking quickly, or perhaps not thinking at all, Astrid grabbed the loose chain, near the end of the spool, and leapt freely off the edge of the sea stack, Nadder fire passed over her head, coming close to hitting the chain, but not close enough to melt it; a fact she repeatedly thanked the Gods for when she thought back on the incident). She hung tightly onto the chain, bracing herself for the moment it would come to a sudden and jarring halt, which it did, pinching her fingers between the links. She managed to maintain her grip, thankfully. The Dragon passed overhead, appearing stunned at its prey's odd choice.

Hanging twenty meters down the sea stack, Astrid flung the shield away, letting fall into the distant, grasping waves. She wrapped the chain around her right forearm, strengthening her tenuous lifeline. She had no idea where her axe was, but at that moment, she was too gratefully alive to care. With her left hand, she unslung her father's hunting bow and retrieved an arrow from the quiver. She could hear the deadly Nadder chirping and squealing far above her head. A few poisonous spines flew out of the inky darkness above, but she kicked away from the cliff wall and let them pass by harmlessly. The Nadder was following close behind them.

Gripping her father's bow, and the chain with her right hand, she notched another arrow and crouched against the rocks, aiming straight up at the sky, and at the oncoming Nadder, which had chosen to dive bomb her. She kicked off a second time, to get into its blindspot. As it swerved to compensate, she was treated to its profile, and she let the arrow loose. It flew wide of its mark, but ripped straight through the yellowish underside one of the creature's leathery wings. Wounded, the demon decided that this particular prey was not worth the trouble. It leveled out and flew almost lazily out towards Raven Point.

Knowing that her father would tear a strip off her if she lost it, Astrid very carefully slung the bow across her chest. Then, hand over

hand, she used the chain to walk herself up the side of the sea stack.

* * *

><p>As she winched up the heavy portcullis, Astrid felt a great sense of relief sweep through her. Her pupils, save little Sigerich Hrolfson, were all alive and well, and doing their part to help her lift the heavy gate. Eventually it was high enough to let her slip under, and she did so, feeling a lightness in her heart as the children gathered around her, wrapping their arms around each other in one giant group hug.</p>

The arena was a mess. Blast residue from the Zippleback attack coated a large area of the floor. Most of the wooden barriers had been smashed to pieces, as had the water barrels. The long zippleback neck, with its bulbous head and lifeless eyes was draped over a low portable oak wall. Astrid spotted her axe amongst the wreckage, and thanked Thor.

"Is everyone alright?"

"Yes, Miss Hofferson!" they echoed.

"What were you all doing here?" she asked.

"Waiting for you, Miss." A few of the children answered. Astrid felt guilt stab at her.

"Sigerich went back to the village!" Osmand reported. "He said he was getting hungry."

Two dozen frightened little faces peered up at her, searching for some reassurance. Astrid closed her eyes against that image of the little burning body tottering out of the furnace. She took a deep breath and said, "I'll go back and look for him. But the village isn't safe. I want you all to get into the Nightmare's pen. I'll close the door to make sure no dragons can get to you."

She considered it a sign of how well trained they were that the young children followed her instructions without a single complaint or hesitation. All it took as a promise that she would retrieve them in the morning. As she climbed up out of the pen and let down the massive iron girders which were built to keep dragons contained, she let herself feel a little relief. That stall was built to contain a Monstrous Nightmare. Locked behind its massive iron doors, those children were now about as safe as they could possibly get.

Astrid collected her axe, and headed back to the village, keeping a watchful eye on the skies.

* * *

><p>The battle in Berk was still in full swing, though it looked as though the Vikings had finally gained an upper hand. It was safe enough at last that bucket chains were rapidly forming. Stoick stood at the center of the plaza, organizing the defense, and directing the wounded to the shelters.</p>

Astrid made to approach him, but was pulled into an alleyway by

Fishlegs. "Astrid!" he said, sounding relieved. His furs were matted and wet; covered in blood, probably dragon's blood. There were chunks of scaly skin and skull embedded in his massive, dripping club.

"Fishlegs." She said quickly. "I've got to join the defense."

"Not so fast!" he hissed. "We have an opportunity here!"

They both ducked as a Gronckle swooped overhead and dropped a molten boulder through the roof of a nearby house. "Buildings are burning here, Fishlegs. An opportunity for what, exactly?"

He gave her a meaningful look and then pointed up at Haddock Hall, just visible between the buildings' profiles.

"Are you kidding me?" she hissed angrily. She wanted to strike him, but knew he'd just shake it off.

"Stoick is distracted. The entire village is busy. Everyone thinks you're at the arena." He replied. I'd break in myself, but I can't climb. I have to go through the front door, and it's locked. I've tried already. If the lock's broken, he'll know!"

"It's treachery!" she snapped. "We could be exiled! Besides, don't we have better things to worry about right now than Hiccup's notes?"

He shook his head, "That building could go up in smoke during the next raid. Then we'd lose the chance forever. One warrior missing for a few minutes isn't going to make a difference to this battle, but what Hiccup knew could stop this entire war. Is that worth it to you?"

"Sigerich Hrolfson got burned to death by a Nightmare earlier!" She reported angrily, "And you want to make peace with the damned beasts? Hiccup was insane, Fishlegs!"

"Kids will continue to get burned as long as Dragons continue to raid!" he replied in a measured, yet serious tone. "Someday perhaps it'll be my child. If you don't help me stop this insanity, then that'll be on your head."

They glared at each other.

"Fine." Astrid said shortly, gritting her teeth. "But if I get caught, if I go down, so do you."

"Of course." He said seriously. "We were always in it together, Astrid. I swear on Thor's Hammer."

Satisfied, she turned and slunk through the shadows towards Haddock Hall.

As she moved, she tried to ignore the dishonor of her actions. She was disobeying a direct order from the Chief of her tribe to go through the possessions of a boy who wasâ€‘ well he wasn't dead, butâ€‘

If she were caught, then to the village there was no way this would look good. She'd be exiled. Thrown out of the village at spear-point

and sent on a raft, hopefully find her way to Outcast Island. She'd have to join the ranks of Alvin the Treacherous and his barbarian horde. Not a happy thought.

She was careful to stay in the shadows and out of sight as she made her way to the wall of the Haddock family home. Fishlegs was right; everyone was so busy either fighting dragons or putting out fires that no Viking ever came close to spotting her. She clambered up the side of the building and hoisted herself through the open window, to land on Hiccup's tiny bed. Outside, she could hear the roars of the beasts, and the sounds of struggling Vikings. Her guilt increased tenfold.

Whatever Fishlegs hoped to find, it had damned well better be worth it!

She took quick stock. She was crouched on Hiccup's bed. To her left in the corner was a chest. Directly in front of her was a thin reed wall, covered in drawings of all shapes and sizes. More designs and plans for all manner of devices there to help the island. A treasure trove to rival the sketches in Gobber's forge. Yet Astrid was struck by the largest of them; an almost perfect sketch of her fourteen-year-old self. She quirked a smile as she recalled that old skirt (now owned by one of her younger cousins), and the way she'd chosen to have her bangs always covering one eye. She had thought it looked good at the time. That was important for a warrior, right? Now she saw it for the tactically crippling error it was. It reduced depth perception which made bows difficult to shoot, and leaps more difficult to judge. Her skill in both had increased significantly when she had finally done her hair up in one thick braid down her back.

It was an excellent sketch, she felt. Her younger self was posed with her axe, gazing intensely through the paper. It captured a younger Astrid's ferocity, as yet untempered by the real experience she would gain later. It was some of that same unbridled intensity which had driven him away, and yet again the thought troubled her.

An intricate heart had been drawn around it, with the words 'The most beautiful girl in Midgard' written underneath.

There wasn't much else in the room. A few shelves with trinkets on them. But nothing that looked suspicious enough for her to investigate. She poked through his papers, but didn't find anything, and she knew in her gut that he would not have been so stupid as to leave his Night Fury notes in plain sight.

The only thing left was the chest. It was full of rather expensive-looking children's clothing and a few more trinkets. She reached the bare wooden bottom and stared down into its emptiness, her hopes dashed. She sat back on her haunches and sighed to herself, staring unblinkingly at the chest.

But something was wrong; the floor of the chest was significantly higher than the floor of the room it sat in. She reached back in and knocked on the wooden bottom, producing a hollow noise.

A hidden compartment! Clever boy!

Excitement coursed through her veins as she gently pried the false

wooden panel upwards. Her heart pounded in her chest as dozens of detailed sketches were revealed.

There was the Night Fury, looking playful; there was the Night Fury looking as fierce as young Astrid had always tried to be; there was a sketch of it looking utterly adorable, with big, round eyes, and its ears or horns or whatever they were perked up like a puppy or a kitten.

What became immediately apparent wasn't just Hiccup's skill as an artist, nor the amount of time he had spent with his dragon, but rather it was a determination to capture the creature's personality. To repaint it as a playful animal instead of the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself.

There was more. Other sketches were of the technical sort. It became immediately obvious that the Night Fury was missing a tailfin. That was obviously what had kept it grounded, and allowed Hiccup to train it. He had replaced the fin with a prosthetic. The mechanisms were there, planned and drawn in painstaking detail. Not only the fin itself, but the mechanisms by which Hiccup opened and closed it, and used it to pilot the beast.

So this was what he had been doing, all those afternoons he had raced away after Dragon Training! Great Odin's ghostâ€œ unbelievable! It was still so unbelievable! And how had they all missed it for eight years?

Because they never would have expected anything like it out of Hiccup the Useless, Hiccup the Screw-Up. Hiccup the Walking Disaster.

The greatest find was a small journal, bound crudely in reddening animal hide. In ink, written on the front in large letters were the words:

How To Train Your Dragon by Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III

Her mouth filling with bile, and her thoughts confused with doubt and guilt, she slipped the papers into her belt. She put everything back as close to the way she'd found it as she could recall, and made to creep back out the window. She paused for one more second to take the drawing of herself. It was too tempting to resist. Then she crept out the window of Haddock Hall, and rejoined the fight.

* * *

><p>It was drizzling the morning after. A thick wet mist hung in the air, and rain droplets pattered lightly all around Astrid as she stood outside her family's hall, staring across the wide dirt path<p>

The Hofferson's had all made it through another one, thank Thor. However of the seventeen Hrolfson clan members, only two remained alive. One of them had survived the Nightmare's burning gel, and was with the wounded. The other was little Sigerich Hrolfson's father Hundolfr, who had been on the other side of Berk at the time of the attack.

Yet he was at his home now, or the lot-sized, charred nest of kindling which was all that remained of it. One of the building's

corners had survived the fire, though it was a chest-high section of wall now. Hundolfr was huddled against it, his son's tiny, blackened body clutched in his arms, charred to the point of unrecognizable. The helpless tears streaming down his cheeks betrayed the depths of his grief.

Astrid had not had an easy night. She had killed more dragons including another Gronkle, a Nadder she had taken down with Gobber's help, and several Terrible Terrors. After the Dragons finally relented she had discretely passed Hiccup's notes to Fishlegs, and curled up in the lee of a shed's overhang to catch a few blessed moments of sleep. But thoughts of tottering children, covered in flaming Nightmare gel troubled her dreams, and she found sleep elusive.

"Hundolfrâ€|" she said hesitantly, "â€|Mister Hrolfson?"

The man's grip tightened on his son's body.

"Mister Hrolfson, I'm sorryâ€|" she murmured, feeling the pre-dawn chill setting in. It was made worse by the moisture. "I'm so sorryâ€| I was in my hallâ€| if I'd gotten out thirty seconds soonerâ€|"

"A' leas' ya killed the beast." He said tonelessly, staring at the muddy ground.

Astrid glanced at the headless corpse. "Yeahâ€|"

Hundolfr Hrolfson rose to his feet. He set his son's body down at the center of his burnt home, and began searching the wreckage.

"I was buying chicken meat." He said, pulling up fallen beams "Sigerich said he was hungry, an' I was across town buying chicken meat." He found what he was looking for, and seized it. The metal in what could formerly have been called a mace had melted and hardened into an indefinable shape. Yet it was still heavy, and hard enough to weild.

"I just wanted to feed my family!" the man declared, slipping haphazardly across the mud towards the nightmare's corpse. "I just wanted to feed my goddamned family, and theseâ€| _these demonsâ€|_" he choked out the last words as he reached the dragon's corpse. With a sickly thwock, he brought the melted mace down against the dragon's motionless side. Ribs cracked and a small amount of blood seeped out of the new gash the former father had created. The melted implement fell again and again, slowly turning what was left of the corpse to mulch, and with each blow the wild-eyed father cursed the creatures in the name of a different god.

Astrid turned away and slowly trudged down the hill. The plaza was taken up by rows of bodies. Around four dozen, according to her estimate. Around half of those were from the Hrolfson hall alone. The rest were warriors.

The children had been freed from the arena, and she had put them to work cleaning the wreckage. Charred timber was being toted up to the cleared area which the town used for the mass funerals which were always held after a raid. It wasâ€| an unfortunate reality that what usually made up the wood for the funeral pyres was the leftovers of the badly burned homes.

Fishlegs crossed her path toting two enormous timbers, and they gave each other grim nods.

Civilians were picking their way through the wreckage, tidying the place up and trying to get life back to some semblance of normal, as they always did after a raid.

"Astrid!" a voice called out. She spun around to find Tuff-nut Thorston motioning at her. "Astrid, the Chief wants us in the Great Hall!"

* * *

><p>The door to the hall opened to reveal nearly every able-bodied warrior Berk had left. They were gathered in a giant crowd around the central bonfire, and the circular table. Above them all, the golden statue glittered. It depicted a dragon being impaled by a sword. Astrid could hear Stoick's booming voice, and she pushed through the crowd until she was at the table, almost directly across from him. He was bruised and blackened with smoke, but as imposing and inspiring a figure as ever.</p>

"Either we finish them, or they'll finish us! It's the only way we'll be rid of them!" he cried. "If we find the nest and destroy it, the dragons will leave. They'll find another home." He planted his dagger in the map. "One more search. Before the ice sets in."

"Those ships never come back!" one warrior called out.

"We're Vikings." Stoick declared. "It's an occupational hazard! Now, who's with me?"

The warriors were hesitant. Muttering could be heard across the chamber as the collected Vikings weighed their options, and their lives. Stoick frowned, but brightened when he spotted Astrid. He called out, "How many dragons did you kill last night, Astrid?"

"Five dragons and a pack of terrors!" she answered back loudly. "And I drove a Nadder from the arena." Technically she had driven the Zippleback away as well, but with one head missing, it wouldn't last a day. Its carcass was out there, somewhere in the forest.

The muttering ceased as people looked to her, impressed. She spotted Snotlout standing beside his father. He had crossed his arms sourly; the previous night he had only managed to kill four dragons, all of them with assistance from his entourage.

"And will you sail with me to Helheim's Gate, Astrid Hofferson?" Stoick asked.

"I will, sir!" she said immediately, glad for a chance to serve, and regain some of the honor she felt she had lost the night before.

"Astrid Hofferson is with me!" Stoick called out to the indecisive crowd, "And the rest of you? Are you with me?"

Hands raised across the chamber, accompanied by grim and determined

faces. Cries were heard of "To the ships!"

"Gather your bags, and gather supplies. We leave in an hour!" Stoick cried.

The hall emptied as the warriors left for their homes, or what was left of their homes. Astrid was charging down the hill towards Hofferson Hall when Fishlegs pulled her aside again. He handed her an oiled leather bag, the most water-proof container they had. "I made copies of what I could." He said. "But here's some of his original notes. You have the original Journal."

She opened it. The journal was indeed inside, along with a few extra sheets of paper. "Thanks, Fishlegs."

"Don't get caught with it." He warned quietly.

"I won't." she promised. "I'm off to war."

"War?" He frowned. "A counter-attack? He's not sailing to Helheim's Gate is he?"

She stayed silent. It was the only answer he needed.

"Don't go." He said. "Those ships don't come back."

"Fishlegs, last night I stole from our chief." She replied. "I have to do this!"

"You're probably walking to your grave."

"Then I'll die with a sword in my hand." Astrid shook her head. "You stay here. Teach the children, raise your kid! And find out what the hell Hiccup was up to."

He sighed. "Are you sure?"

"Never ask me that question." She declared quietly. She looked him up and down. "What are you going to do?"

"Find a dragon. Catch it. And train it." He answered shortly. He took her hand and shook it. "Good luck, Astrid. I'll make a sacrifice for you guys."

"You too, Fishlegs. And thanks." She took a few awkward steps away. "I've got to gather some things we leave in an hour."

* * *

><p>Well I hope you guys enjoyed that action scene. It was the first of a few which will be included in this story. But it also sets the tone.

I'm not sure if anyone has seen videos from the Pacific theatre of World War Two, but those flamethrowers caused some of the most horrific wartime images that exist. Second only to the holocaust death camps and even then by a narrow margin. It was these images I turned to when I wrote about the Monstrous Nightmare's attack.

**According to USA defense department memos circa WWII, The Japanese flame throwers actually used Kerosene, the active ingredient in Nightmare spit. **

The reality of being raided by these dragons is not nice, and it would be a lot uglier than the movies and the kid's TV show are allowed to depict.

Ten chapters in and all the pieces are finally in play. Now I can finally get this story going. Let me know if you guys spot any errors or anything please. And I always appreciate your comments and inputs and whatnots. :)

**Cheers, **

-CC

12. Chapter 12

**Soâ€| I made this decision as I was writing this chapter, but I'm going to stick with it: Hiccup and Astrid's respective storylines are not happening at exactly the same time. I'll try to keep each story at a similar pace while they're separate, but Hiccup's happens over months, Astrid happens over about a week. **

Prodigal Son 12

Two months had passed by since he had met Artemisia, and Hiccup had attended her sessions religiously. Yanick had not taken well to his new calling, but money was money and the government had given him a generous sum. Now Hiccup's life was divided between the Forge and his studies. He spent half his days either in the classroom or the library.

The evenings, however, were free.

At least, this one was. He had always been able to wrangle a few hours after classes to visit with Shahira. A quick meal in the marketplace, followed by a visit to some interesting sight or other. Perhaps a long walk around the markets, or a musical performance, or a play. Hiccup had read Aristotle's Poetics, and the philosopher's insights into the basic construction of stories piqued his passing interest.

Tonight, however, he and Shahira had found a quiet place on the Heptastadion, the enormous dyke which connected the Island of Pharos to the mainland. At one end of the causeway was the Temple of Isis, which had fallen somewhat into ruin. At the other lay the Agora, and an old military fort manned with a skeletal garrison of overworked and underpaid imperial soldiers.

Shahira had been growing more and more silent over the past few weeks. He was starting to worry that something was really wrong.

The view Hiccup had found looked out east across the harbor. The Pharos lighthouse, and Cleopatra's needle were both alight with the orange glow of the early sunset. He and Shahira could both see the brown and yellow sails of the fishing fleets docked across the harbor. Far above them, a multitude of seagulls circled, searching

for scraps of food. The water in the harbor was calm and placid. Almost mirror-like except for the occasional gentle wave.

"I was doing some more research in the library." Hiccup told her.

"Shocker."

He snorted. "Wow. Curb that enthusiasm."

"Sorry." She flashed him a smile. "What were you researching?"

"The movement of the planets." He said eagerly. "I was looking at the old Astrological records."

"And?"

"Andâ€œ look, the heliocentric model does actually work. It explains the planets' movements."

Shahira drew her knees up. "I'm sensing a 'but' coming on here."

Hiccup stared at her, opening and closing his mouth.
"â€œ|_However_â€œ|"

"Aw, come on!"

"Well I couldn't say 'But' without â€œaaand you're laughing anyway. That'sâ€œ| that's mature."

Shahira bit her tongue and grinned at him. "What's the problem, Hiccup?"

"The problem is time. Circular orbits don't work. They explain the movements of the planets, but the timing is all wrong. They still aren't where they should be at the end of each given month. It also doesn't explain the seasons. I meanâ€œ| the epicycles explain it; the world gets hotter and colder depending on how far the planet is from the sun."

"And?"

"And that wouldn't happen with a circular orbit. We'd have night and day, but no change in seasons."

"Can't you include Epicycles in the heliocentric model?"

He shook his head. "I don't like them on principle. I don't trust them. No matter which model you use, everything revolves around something else. The moon orbits the Earth. The Earth and all the other planets orbit the sunâ€œ| But what would cause the planets to travel on an epicycle? What exactly is at the center of those circles? What is at the point of rotation, and why can't we see it when we look up into the sky? There's no object there."

She chewed her lip, thinking hard. "It could be colored black so that we can't make it out in the night sky."

"But it would still eclipse the light of the sun, right? Someone

still should have noticed it but I can't find anything in the library!"

"How many hours, exactly, did you spend on this?"

"I dunnoâ€|" He shrugged. "A couple days?"

She picked up a small stone and tossed it into the water where, with a plop, it sank and spread ripples across the surface. "To what end?"

"I want to know."

"Well yeah but what difference does it make? Epicycles or not you're still stuck here in Eskendereyya."

"Alexandria."

"Whatever."

"What's going on with you today?"

"I guess I'm just in a mood." She murmured. "I just wonder what the point is, sometimes."

"Hey! You were the one who introduced me to her." He pointed out indignantly.

"I know. The lessons are good. And they're free- which is great! But sometimes she sends us off on the dumbest searches."

"Learning about the world isn't dumb!"

"I want practical lessons, Hiccup! Heliocentric or not, what good does it do me to know how the planets work? It's not like we can get to the othersâ€|"

"Not today." He said. "Maybe someday."

"But it's not useful now! All the geometry and math you've learned has helped you at the forge. It helps with your job. The philosophy helps the writers and actors in her class."

"I'm sure there's something in there that can help fishermen as well."

"Well I haven't seen it yet." She said sourly. "I've been going for a couple years now assuming I was going to be able find a job or something." She picked up a rock and weighed it in her hand, then threw it into the harbor with some amount of ferocity. "But I went around the markets today, looking for work. The moment I tell them I can read and write they act like it's some fucking scandal! Learning can be a curse, Hiccup. It'll tell you all about the world and make you realize exactly how much you don't have! I just feel like I'm spinning my wheels here."

"I'm sure someone out there would hire you, Shahira. Artemisia would give you a reference."

"I doubt it. I'm not exactly her star pupil. I have fishing to do. I can't afford to go to all her lessons, or spend half my nights in the library."

"Ouch! Hey!"

"Sorry." But her heart wasn't in the apology and they both knew it. She hugged her shoulders and leaned forward, drawing herself inwards.

Hiccup leaned over and put an arm around her, pulling her close.
"What's going on, Shahira?"

The young woman rubbed her eyes and planted her face in her hands, "The fisheries are drying up and the pirates are getting worse and worse. Dad's thinking of sailing us west around the Iberian Peninsula, and then maybe north to Britain."

Hiccup's heart took a swan dive. "You're leaving Alexandria?"

"There's nothing here. Artemisia says it's the most civilized place on the planet, but there's nothing for us. I'm a fisherman's daughter." She said bitterly. "The only way I'm getting out of this is if I find someone to marry. A farmer, or a baker, or a cartwright, or a—"

"Or a blacksmith?" He asked as certain pieces of the puzzle quietly clicked into place. She stopped in mid-sentence, meeting his gaze. They stared at each other, and she leaned in, kissing him softly before the moment grew awkward. Their lips melded together for just a moment, but in that moment, Hiccup was reminded of blonde hair and captivating, burning blue eyes. He flinched backwards, cursing at himself all the while. Loki's balls! Every time! Every! Damned! Time!

"I knew it!" Shahira said. She crossed her arms and flopped back against the stonework, scowling across the bay. "No wonder you're always running away to the 'library' after sunset. What's her name?"

"Shahira, I'm sorry—"

"Don't. Just— just don't." the young woman replied harshly. "What's her name?"

Hiccup sighed, feeling defeated. "Astrid Hofferson."

"Astrid Hofferson. I knew it." Her voice was tart. "And what does she do here?"

"She's not here. She's from— from Berk. From my home." Hiccup managed to get the phrase out. He was busy trying to quell the emotions which had suddenly ignited in his chest.

Shahira snorted. "Can't even compete with someone who's half-way around the world. Fantastic."

"It's not like that!" he protested.

Shahira whirled around to face him. "Then what is it like, Hiccup Haddock? What exactly is it like? What have you and I been doing the past two months? After damned near every lesson. No wonder you've been slower than a glacier!"

"That's not fair!" he protested.

Shahira rocketed to her feet. "What's not fair is you wasting my time!"

"I thought I was over her."

She glared down at him. "Shouldn't you figure that sort of thing out before you take up with someone else?"

When he neglected to comment, she just growled in frustration. "I don't blame you for carrying a torch. I just wish you hadn't been leading me on."

"I'm sorry." He said feebly. What else could he say?" He still hadn't told her. Not about Berk and his father, nor about Toothless. When Hiccup sat and looked long and hard at his own feelings, he realized that he had no intention of telling Shahira. He liked her very much, and enjoyed her company. She was certainly beautiful, butâ€¦

But what?

But Astrid, that's what.

Hiccup had carried a torch for Astrid Hofferson for as long as he could remember. He had memories of loving that girl since before Gobber had taken him in at the forge. He'd never had a hope, of course. But that hadn't stopped his day dreams. She was his distant star. Her courage and determination and loyalty to the tribe were ideals he always shooting for, but somehow always fell short of. The way that she, even as a teenager, had been such a help to Berkâ€|. Gods above, he had envied her so much. She was everything he had ever wanted to be, to the point where there were only two possible things he could feel towards her: hate, or love. Hiccup regarded himself as many, many things, but hateful was not one of them.

Then he had discovered Toothless and the truth about Dragons. Much distance and even more time had been put between them, yet neither had extinguished that flame. During the worst moments of his travels, she had always been floating in the sky above him, a guiding light every bit as strong as the North Star. The true north of his moral compass.

Hehâ€| not that he'd managed to stay the course all that well; the thought caused the weight in his chest to increase tenfold. The sudden constriction in his chest was almost painful.

Hiccup had never found glory on the battlefield. None the likes of which Astrid had always celebrated. And as for courage and loyalty, wellâ€|

He had run from Berk when he didn't fit. He had run from the Varangian guards when he didn't fit. He had run from practically every town or village which had ever taken him in. Every damned time they started to accept him, he'd do something stupid, like balance a

bible on a couple of eggs.

Then it was torches, pitchforks, and ridiculous amounts of anger. And he'd never had the gumption to stay and fight. Not the way Astrid chose to soldier through every situation, with her head held high.

His own cowardice was the worst part, and it was what made thinking about her so utterly painful that he actively stopped his thoughts from drifting in her direction, and in Berk's direction.

He had other questions. Things which haunted him in the dark of the night, when the world grew too quiet to drown out his thoughts. Was Astrid married? Was she happy? Was there any way in Hel's realm that Hiccup could have been her partner? How could things possibly have ever worked between two such different people?

How would Astrid react if she saw him now? He knew that she would kill him immediately just for riding Toothless. But what hurt the most was the disbelief, disappointment, and betrayal which he always imagined her eyes carrying as she swung the axe at him. Or perhaps Stoick would carry out the act. Either way his executioner would have that same look in his eyes.

That gulf hurt. Hiccup knew that Berk would never accept him back. Not if they knew the truth. Perhaps they wouldn't regardless. He doubted he was missed much; his over eagerness had caused enough property damage. But if they let him back in, he would still be living a lie. Toothless would be hidden away in the Cove for his entire life. What would happen if someone found the dragon? What if they killed him while Hiccup was in Gobber's forge, or doing the chores? Toothless' life was in danger every minute he was on that island.

There was too much at stake. As painful as it was, at least Hiccup could live in a world where Astrid hated his guts, and the whole village viewed him as a traitor. A world without Toothless, on the other hand, without flight, was completely intolerable. Leaving was the only decision he could have made. It was just the worst decision of his life.

Hiccup realized that Shahira was walking away, her arms crossed and her shoulders hunched. He watched her for a few seconds. He could do it, he knew. All he had to do was get up, and kiss her. They could talk through the problem. Shahira was reasonable enough. But he wasn't willing to take things further with Shahira. It would mean tying himself down for good, and tying Toothless down with him, and he couldn't do that to his friend. Not when there was still a risk of pitchfork and torch-toting hordes.

Instead he found his gaze drawn to the Library. The sun was setting, and Toothless would be gearing up for their nightly tour of the coastline.

* * *

><p>A silent day was spent at the Forge. Yanick hadn't even acknowledged him when he'd arrived. He suspected Shahira's father had said something to the smith. Still, he had enough work to distract him. Yanick still paid him, and he was out the door a few hours

before sunset. Bereft of Shahira's usual company, Hiccup found himself wandering aimless through the quiet streets until he found himself outside an ancient Roman villa.<p>

Artemisia's Villa, to be specific. It was set back a little from the street, with a pale, yellowing outer wall hiding its interior garden. Hiccup had been there several times. Artemisia had helped him work through his heliocentric equations, and search for errors.

The villa was spotlessly maintained. Artemisia kept several slaves including a gardener, as well as a cook. She was one of the few people in the city wealthy enough to afford them. Vikings also had thralls and slaves, though Berk was too poor and too busy to let their economy grow through the trade. Hiccup found the practice a little unpalatable, mostly because he could imagine how utterly trapped he would feel had their places been reversed. Yet Artemisia seemed to treat her slaves with dignity and respect, and they seemed quite content. Hiccup was so taken with her ideas and enthusiasm that he found it easy to forgive.

He tread up the path to her front door, and knocked a few times. A small panel opened, and the stern face of one of her slaves greeted him.

"Hi." Hiccup said.

"Who is it, Lugos?" that was Artemisia's voice.

"One of your students, Mistress." The man reported.

"Well open the door and let him in!"

The door creaked open, revealing the red and white tiled interior. Gold trimming lined the window sills, and wound its way up narrow pillars. The entrance hall was lined with marble statues of varying types and sizes. Artemisia was standing in the center of the foyer, looking surprised, but not displeased. "Hiccup?"

"Hello." Hiccup waved awkwardly. Lugos the slave stood sentry at the door. He was an older fellow with graying hair and suspicious eyes. He was dressed in a modest grey robe, which offset Artemisia's stately white dress.

"Who's there?" Another man's voice called out, echoing down the hall.

"It's one of my students." Artemisia called back.

"He here to ask for money?"

"Martius!" she barked uncharacteristically.

"Alright, easyâ€|" the man's voice said.

"My mistress is currently occupied." Lugos reported, giving Hiccup a cold glare.

"Lugos, close the door, please, will you?" Artemisia asked. She strode forward a few paces and smiled at Hiccup. "It's always a pleasure to see you. What's going on?"

"Sorry. I think I really upset Shahira, and I was looking forâ€œ!" Hiccup paused, not entirely sure why he had come over.

"Advice?" Artemisia guessed, the corner of her mouth curling up into a smile.

"A distraction." He corrected awkwardly. "You know what, it really isn't important. You have company, andâ€œ!"

"Nonsense." Artemisia gently grabbed his arm and gently but firmly propelled him down the hallway, with Lugos following behind at a respectful distance. The Villa was a square building with a small lush garden in the center, open to the sky. A set of two finely upholstered chaise lounges were set up in the courtyard. A man was lying across one of them, one hand occupied with a glass of wine, the other picking grapes out of a bowl in front of him. Hiccup's pace slowed considerably when he spotted the black eagle insignia on the man's leather cuirass. Not to mention the armor he had piled beside his chair. The man looked to be similar to Artemisia in age. His beard was thick, but greying. A few scars dotted his features, one across his eyebrow and another cutting across his cheek towards his chin. It gave his face an irregular look. He was pressing the wineglass to his forehead.

Hiccup found himself skillfully maneuvered onto the sofa across from the stranger. Artemisia circled and took up station leaning against the man's lounge chair. "Hiccup, this is Martius, captain of the city guard. He's aâ€œ! a friend."

"Is _that_ all?" the guardmen asked cheekily.

Artemisia tsked and slapped him across the head.

"Ow!" the man glared up at her. "You're going to do more damage than the rock did, you know."

"I'm sure there's nothing inside to bruise." She said pleasantly.
"Lugos!"

"Mistress." The slave materialized.

"Bring another glass of wine for Hiccup, please. And have the cook prepare a meal for us."

"It will be done, Mistress." The slave bowed respectfully and dematerialized.

Martius, the guard captain, was staring at Hiccup. "So, troubles with women?"

"It's complicated."

"Let me let you in on a little secret, my friend." Martius leaned forward, his leather cuirass creaking. "Romance always is."

"_We_ get along quite well, I suppose." The woman mused, taking a seat beside the captain. She shot him a subtle glare. "Though you could speak of your work a little less while under my roof."

"You asked for news." He shot back defensively.

"You two are living together?" Hiccup said, surprised.

"Not entirely sure that's your business." The man said. He was still holding that glass of wine to his forehead.

"Excuse Martius, Hiccup." Artemisia said patiently. "He's had a very trying day."

"Sorry. It's justâ€¦ you didn't strike me as theâ€¦ domestic type of person." Hiccup told her.

"Oh, we're not married." Martius gazed down bitterly at the garden's grass. "Situation's a little too delicate to make a political statement like that."

"How do you mean? Surely in a city this large, no one would care about that."

"In a city this large, everyone cares about something." Martius' free hand joined Artemisia's at his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. He said, "Artemisia doesn't get along with the people I always have to pander to." He smiled up at her and they shared a kiss. Hiccup politely averted his eyes, feeling wholly embarrassed, but he could still hear them.

"You run your mouth too much, my dear."

"A habit I have no intention of curtailing." She replied.

"Yeah, wellâ€¦ till you doâ€¦" the captain died away into somewhat bitter silence. When he spoke again, he addressed Hiccup. "What's your name?"

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third."

"Ha ha ha!"

"Martius!"

"Sorry. Well Hiccupâ€¦ you know where you are?"

"A city devoted to natural philosophy and the preservation of knowledge." Hiccup said earnestly.

Martius snorted, watching him carefully. "Oh, you've done a good job on this one, Artemisia."

Hiccup's teacher scowled down at her partner. Martius leaned forward, ignoring her reaction. He lowered his wineglass revealing a horrendously ugly purple bruise. "You're sitting at the ass end of a crumbling empire, you know that? Up north you got the former Roman Empire. They used to be effective, but that lion lost its teeth a long time ago. They're under constant attack, and the emperors are too busy killing each other off to bother with proper defense. You know they had four in one year? It's been insane. You can hardly find one that gets a rule over ten years long, and he's nearly always murdered. There's no stability. At least in the west Charlemagne did a lot of good, and he put europe back on its feet, but his brat

Louis' in power now, and the Caliphate hounds have been chasing him all the way up the Iberian Peninsula." He grunted thoughtfully, and looked Hiccup up and down. "But you already know that. I meanâ€œ you were a Varangian."

Hiccup's jaw dropped. "How did you know?"

Behind Martius' chair, Artemisia had raised her eyebrows. She was giving Hiccup a thorough and curious examination. He hadn't shared much of his past with her either.

"You're a Dane." Martius said. "Every Dane who ever came this far south was a Varangian. It's not hard to figure out. What interests me is that there are no Varangians garrisoned here in Alexandria." Once again the Captain was giving him a thorough examination. "That would mean you're either here on special assignmentâ€œ or you're a deserter."

"Iâ€œ!" Hiccup was very aware of the black Imperial eagle crest which adorned so much of the man's clothing. It was on the front of his shield, which he had propped against the side of his deck chair.

"Relax." Martius said, sensing the direction of Hiccup's thoughts. "You're one of Artemisia's students, so as far as I'm concerned, you're not a troublemaker. That's good enough. I'm not about to turn you in."

"Iâ€œ!" Hiccup's shoulders slumped. "I left them. I don't like fighting."

"No one does. Only the insane. But some people seem to have a knack for it." The guardsmen took another sip of wine.

"They asked me to march into people's homes and burn their stuff. And sometimesâ€œ" Hiccup sighed.

"Sometimes they'd just steal whatever wasn't nailed down?" Martius guessed.

For the second time, Hiccup fixed him with a look of amazement. "How did you know?"

"It's what most people would do if they were given free rein to charge into people's homes and churches and ferret around."

"I think most people are better than that."

"That makes one of us. This morning I was trying to unjam the canal's sluice gate-

"I helped rebuild those!" Hiccup said proudly. "The mechanism was my design!"

"Well you didn't make them corpse proof." Martius said sourly. "Next time put up a goddamned net. Someone had slit a few throats and tossed the bodies in. A kid found them, and I spent my morning fishing them out."

"Could we perhaps find a more civil topic?" Artemisia asked.

"It's alright." Hiccup assured them. "I don't mind."

Martius said, "By noon I was standing in a shield wall in the delta quarter to keep the Christians and Muslims from stomping the Jews flat _again_. The Jews weren't helping. They were tossing rocks right over our heads at the other two groups, and yelling all kinds of savory words."

"Lovely." Hiccup murmured. He himself stayed away from the eastern end of the city; it was full of rough neighborhoods.

"Yeah. We arrested a dozen of them, but they're all just young lads with bellies full of hatred and booze."

"Why would anyone want to form a mob and start a riot like that?"

"It's complicated. Everyone's got a different reason."

"Like what?"

"Wellâ€|" Martius frowned into his glass. "Usury is one reason. One of many."

"Usury? Likeâ€| money-lending?"

Martius clarified. "Money lending with interest. I'm a Christian myself. And the empire which this city is a part of is predominantly a Christian empire. Most imperial citizens are Christians. Now, in my religion, lending money and expecting it to be paid back _with interest_ is immoral. So I can't do that. I'm not allowed. Islam has similar rules."

"And the Jews don't?" Hiccup guessed.

Martius shifted uncomfortably. "They have rules as well, but due to Imperial Law, they also aren't really allowed to own land, so they can't be farmers. They can't be artisans or blacksmiths either. No crafting or creating of any kind. So what can they do? How are they supposed to feed themselves and their kids? Moneylending with interest is necessary for a complex economy. It is a job someone has to do, and it is something the Jews are _allowed_ to do. They do it because it's the only way they can feed their families, rules or not."

"That's unfair!"

"Absolutely it is. But your average deadbeat drunk doesn't see that big picture, and he certainly doesn't understand the intricacies of the money-lending business. I think there is such a thing as fair interest. After all, moneylenders have to make a living too. But no, what the drunk sees is that the Jews over there have some control over money when he has none himself. So he picks up a stick and gets a group of friends together to go over there and take some of that money in the name of what he thinks is fairness. What the Jews see is just the latest terrible act against them. One in a centuries-long story of persecution. They riot and strike back. Maybe a few stones are thrown. Maybe a few people get killed. Then everything goes to shit." The guard captain downed his glass in one go and set it down

next to the grapes on the table in front of him.

"And you guys have to step in the middle?"

"Well what can we do? They're working from such radically different perspectives that even if you get both groups in a room talking, they'll just talk past each other. How is one drunk supposed to even grasp the mindset of a community suffering from centuries of persecution? And do you think the Jews are going to listen to him rant about fairness? Will there be any sympathy there?"

"It wouldn't be deserved."

"No." Martius agreed. "But it is likely that the people killed in the Jewish counter-riot weren't even involved in the plot. It is also entirely possible that the Jewish community has been persecuted for so long they don't see a difference between the citizens who attacked them and those who didn't. Everyone is their enemy, and that bunker mindset doesn't help resolve the issues. You just get persecution going in the other direction. Sympathy and empathy are needed on some level if you want them to actually resolve their grievances."

"But surely with enough explaining, they can understand each other." Hiccup reasoned. "We're all human. At the end of the day, we all want the same thing, right?"

"That's an idea which angry rioters aren't usually willing to listen to. You gotta separate them and let things cool before you start making speeches like that."

"And that's where your shield wall comes in."

"Damned straight. My boys are still patrolling that area now, trying to discourage more violence. Take my advice, Hiccup: If you ever find yourself having to police a city, never let a crowd get too big. The bigger the crowd, the stupider it acts." The guard glanced fondly around the villa. "This place is quiet and sensible. That's why I love it."

"And the people in it?" Artemisia prompted lightly.

Martius grinned at her teasingly. "One or two."

She leaned down and kissed him again. She said, "Martius, you know you're welcome any time, butâ€|"

"I know." The man said patiently, rising and gathering his equipment. "One of your pups is whining for milk." He gave Hiccup a dry smile and headed for the door.

"Martius," Hiccup said, a thought striking him.

The captain turned expectantly.

"Some of your guards have been shaking down fisherman for extra money." Hiccup told him.

The guardsman scowled. "They shouldn't be."

"Well it happened to Shahira and her father."

"Who?"

"Anton Pandev." Artemisia said. "He usually docks his ship at the cheaper quay, so his daughter says."

The man nodded slowly. "I'll look into it. Can't have guards shaking down citizens. We have enough trust issues as it is."

Hiccup and Artemisia watched in silence as the guardsmen strolled out, his armor jingling quietly. Lugos escorted him down the hall and out of sight.

"You'll have to forgive Martius, Hiccup." She said fondly.

"He seems veryâ€| worldly." Hiccup replied as diplomatically as he could.

"It is Martius' job to keep the streets safe." She explained. "Which means that while you and I are in our classroom, roaming the worlds of philosophy, mathematics and imagination, he is investigating murders, wrestling drunken thugs to the ground, stepping between rioting crowdsâ€| all manner of terrible things. He is in constant conflict with the most thoughtless, horrible people this civilization has to offer. I fear it has given him a ratherâ€| jaded outlook. It is easy to call him crude or vulgar, but we must remember that people like him are the reason people like us can work and live in peace."

"How did you two meet?"

"A group of young Saracens decided they were going to burn my school to the ground. Martius stopped them. He'll bloody his sword to protect Alexandria's citizens from foreign dangers and one another. That is worth a lot more respect than he usually gets." She chewed her lip for a moment, then smiled at him. "Follow me, Hiccup."

She led him through the villa, their steps echoing quietly on the pristine tiled floor. Lugos materialized and shadowed them at a respectful distance. "What happened between you and Miss Pandev? I thought things were going rather wellâ€|"

"They were." Hiccup said, grimacing. He had been hoping to avoid thinking about it. "But weâ€| hit a wall."

"Yours or hers?"

"Mine." He said shortly.

Artemisia chuckled as she directed them towards a heavy door at the back of the Villa. "Very well, let us leave that topic alone for now. I'll show you what I do in my spare time."

* * *

><p>The room was enormous. Lugos floated past Hiccup as he entered, and began using a striker to light the various strategically placed candles. The flickering flames revealed wooden shelves full of scrolls, and a dozen chalkboards with intricate calculations systematically scrawled across them. A large part of the floor was

taken up with another sand pit. The straight wooden staff planted in one corner confirmed Hiccup's suspicion that it served the same function the classroom floor did; a means to explore visual ideas, and show diagrams quickly. It was a means to write and think without using paper or chalk. To look at ideas from a different perspective.<p>

There was more. An enormous ornate table was at the far end, piled high with scrolls. Two models were placed on stands between the table and the pit. One of them Hiccup recognized as Aristarchus' Heliocentric model of the solar system. The other was a strange construction of three dimensional polygons. A Cube was on the outside, serving both functions as an object within the model, and as the frame around it. A large three-sided pyramid was suspended in the middle of the cube. Inside of it lay three other polyhedrons, each one smaller than, and nestled within its predecessor.

It was a strange construction, and had it been anywhere else, Hiccup would have assumed it merely a tacky piece of art. But this was in Artemisia's inner sanctum. _He was in Artemisia's inner sanctum!_ Hiccup knew by its placement that it held extreme significance to his teacher and mentor.

"There was a Greek philosopher named Plato. Have you ever heard of him?" Artemisia asked, an eager light in her eye as she circled around to the desk.

"The name rings a bell, but I haven't explored his writings yet." Hiccup told her.

Artemisia stared down at the table with an almost wild look, like a starved animal seeking food. She said, "I would like you to imagine that our entire civilization is sitting in a cave, Hiccup. We've been chained up, fastened to the floor in such a way as to keep us staring at a wall, unable to see what is behind us, or to either side. We may only witness the shadows which appear on that cave wall. We may believe of them what we wish. We may name them. We may worship them. We may curse them. But they are all most of us are allowed to see, and most of us are perfectly happy to sit there in the darkness of that one single cave, watching those shadows move across the wall."

"Alright." Hiccup said, picturing what she described. He couldn't help but insert Berkians into the thought experiment. He could see his tribe, the Hairy Hooligans, all lined up in their cave staring dreamily at a fire-lit sandstone wall.

Artemisia kept speaking. "However it is both the burden, and the blessing of inquisitive minds that we are capable of breaking those chains, and when we do, we may turn and find out what is creating those shadows. More than that, we may stroll out of the cave and learn of the world beyond it. Bask in the sunlight of reason. And when we are done wandering the outside world, when we have learned what is true, we may take that knowledge back into the cave, and free the others. It is our job to seek the truth."

"We're already well outside the cave." Hiccup said proudly. "Look at this city! Look how big it is! Look how advanced!"

"No!" Artemisia shook her head. "All that we see and hear, all of

thisâ€| this civilization. The markets, the harbor. All that Martius deals with. All the comings and goingsâ€| all of these common things which most men observeâ€| are merely the shadows on the wall of that cave. While I disagree with Plato on many counts, he and I both agree that the cosmos so much grander than we could ever imagine. But that does not mean that it is all beyond our comprehension. We are merely chained." She stared hungrily at Aristarchus' heliocentric model. "On your first day, you said that Mercury was actually Odin, the Wanderer. Tell me, Hiccup, when you see that planet up in the sky, do you believe you are looking at Odin?"

"Iâ€| did." Hiccup said carefully. "Now I'm wondering if I'm looking at another world. Muspelheim perhaps, home of the fire giants. Mercury is closer to the sun, after all. It must be very hot there."

Artemisia pressed her knuckles to her mouth, staring down at the model. "Perhaps it is just another shadow on the wall. The planets can't literally be the Gods; they wander the same paths every year. Every day, Helios circles us, riding his chariot across the sky. Does that make sense? Is that all he does? How many things do you do in a day, Hiccup? East to west, east to west, east to westâ€| is your path always the same? Surely the Gods have better things to do than simply circle us.

"Perhaps the planets are effigies or totems of some sort. Perhaps as you say, they are other worlds, but there must be some mechanism in place. To make them move, to help them choose their path. Their movements are predictable, therefore they are subject to mathematical laws. To Geometrical laws. The planets and their movements are yet more shadows. To map them is a step forward. But to know what makes them move, what structures support themâ€| What are the mechanisms of the Cosmos? What does it look like when the curtain is pulled away? When we have freed ourselves from Plato's chained herd, and can finally look behind us at what is making these shadows, that is true progress, Hiccup. And Natural Philosophy will get us there!"

Moving rapidly, she strode over to the geometrical model, and laid a careful hand on it. "We are going to crack open the Gods' systems! Plato found the five perfect solids. The points of their geometry, where each match and intersect are nearly an exact match to the movements of the planets in their phases. All it'll take is a little more observation. A little more refinements in my calculations!" she pointed excitedly at the model. "We are inside Plato's perfect solids. A giant, nested model. Whatever gods are in charge, their plans are here, locked in this model!"

Hiccup was feeling dizzy. Just this morning he had been wondering how it seemed that the Earth would be different distances from the sun at different parts of the year, and nowâ€| he said, "That'sâ€| ambitious."

Artemisia frowned, "Of course it is. But once we know itâ€| we can start asking the real questions."

"I'm just a student here, Artemisia. I haven't even been in your class for a year. How can I possibly help?"

"You've been in my classes for three months, and mastered ideas which are still causing others a problem after a decade of hard work.

Hiccup, if anyone I know _can_ help me, it's you."

"But it's all soâ€| big!"

She quirked a smile. "I know I've said this to you before, Hiccup, but distance and size alone should not be impressive. It is merely geometry. Whether a cube is a meter across, or a thousand kilometers across, it is still just a shape. It can be explained, predicted and calculated. This is all merely a matter of geometry and observation." She gestured at the surrounding shelves, piled high with scrolls. "I have copied nearly every Astrological record in the Mediterranean, but the records are incomplete, and very often inaccurate. I need more precise measurements."

"Well you've got the geometry down." Hiccup said. "But how on Earth can you observe the planets? The nighttime lights from this city block out the sky."

"And it is cloudy quite often. I know. I know." She sighed. "If it weren't for my school, I would have moved to the countryside long ago. I do have an estate there, with the equipment necessary for observation. But it is forty kilometers away, and I cannot spend four hours a day riding constantly in and out of Alexandria. I have too many responsibilities here."

Hiccup felt a chill creep down his spine, as if someone was sliding a chunk of snow down the back of his neck. An idea had taken root in his mind. It was growing more powerful by the moment. At his top speed, Toothless could cover twenty kilometers in a matter of seconds.

"Martius does a wonderful job in this city, dealing with mobs and politics. But that isn't my arena! I want to know what goes on in the Heavens!" her arms dropped to her sides. "If only I could get closer to themâ€|"

Hiccup stared down at the model on her table, with its intricate polygons. This was what drove Artemisia; the search for truth, and a greater understanding of the world. If anyone in the world could handle the truthâ€| it was her.

To trust her was a heavy choice, but he made it quickly. He said, "What if I told you I had a way to get you anywhere you needed to go, in just a few minutes?"

She gave him a sharp look. "Outside the city?"

"To your estate. To the top of a mountain. Anywhere." He smiled at her. "Even above the clouds."

* * *

><p>A one reader pointed out that 'Prodigal Son' is not an appropriate name for this story. I had understood that phrase to refer to a wayward son. I was wrong. Prodigal, in point of fact, means 'unwise with one's money', and irresponsible is not exactly the picture I was going for with this particular version of Hiccup. If any of you have any suggestions for a different Fic name, please send me a message.

[*Update!*-14/04/12- I decided to keep the name the same afterall.]

I would like to address two concerns which were raised about Chapter 10 (Hiccup's first lesson with Artemisia).

Firstly, I would like to apologize for an editing flub in Chapter 10. I had originally intended to simply use Hypatia, but I in the end decided to change the name, as well as a few facets of her opinion, research, and fate to better fit the story. Making her 'Artemisia' instead granted me more flexibility as I'm working with a fictional character. However I failed to change the name in all instances and that caused a little confusion. My apologies.

Secondly, a few readers wondered where in the Bible it states that the earth is flat. The "Four Corners" of the earth are referenced multiple times in the Bible. Spheres do not have corners. This could very reasonably be interpreted as the four points of a compass, but that is not what was being taught and preached at that time. People were told by teachers and pastors alike that the earth was both flat, and at the center of the solar system (if not the universe). Copernicus and Galileo had yet to disprove it. These hypotheses were considered fact at that time, and they were taught as such by most people.

As for this chapter, I understand that sympathy for Martius (a policeman) may perhaps be difficult, given the recent events in Ferguson and New York. Racial and religious tensions have always been an aspect of any civilized society, and one of my goals is to bring Alexandria to life, its aspects both wondrous, and unsavory. Putting Hiccup in the middle of a riot could do that, but we're going slow enough as it is, and this way I get to save a chapter, explore the issues of big city life, AND show more of Artemisia's character and background. It's a matter of efficiency.

**The Black Eagle crest mentioned on Martius' shield is significant as well. Traditionally, the symbol of the Byzantine Empire was a blue cross, yet that was introduced around forty-five years AFTER this story takes place. Before the symbol was changed to reflect the Empire's new Christian heritage, Byzantium still used the Black Eagle, a symbol the Romans had been using for centuries. Expect it to make a few more appearances in this story. **

Artemisia's Cave is actually a philosophical metaphor presented by Plato in his book "The Republic". From what I understand, this book is probably one of the most influential in human history, second only to the Bible and The Origin of the Species.

**Plato would not actually have gotten along very well with Artemisia. He did not believe in comparing his ideas to reality, in large part because he felt reality was merely the shadows on the wall of his cave. Thus to discuss and compare with reality was to compare with a compromised test sample, so to speak. Better to find the source. He did not believe in the Scientific Method and Experimentation. But he was a very intelligent man nevertheless, and the human race was greatly affected by his ideas. **

**Plato's philosophy was passed through his student Aristotle all the way down through the ranks of history's philosophers to St. Thomas Aquinas, and as I understand it, it is to that man we owe Modern

Christianity. His three-tiered system of God's Law, Natural Law, and Human Law revolutionized the way the Church approached the world. While it did somewhat distance God from everyday life, it was a much needed update which resolved an enormous number of moral inconsistencies between the Biblical accounts, and reality.

**

**Through Aquinas, Plato helped to shape Christianity. Christianity in turn shaped the history of the western world. I do want to state that my understanding of Church History is not complete, and I would appreciate any input you guys have! **

Artemisia's ideas about what drives the universe, about the planets movements tracing the points of Plato's perfect solids are stolen straight from the theories of a 17**th**** century German scientist named Johannes Kepler. **

In the end, he turned out to be wrong. The observations and calculations which he felt proved his theory, happened to be no more than a coincidence. He spent years trying to make the Perfect Solids model work, utterly convinced he had cracked God's mechanisms open like a hard-boiled egg. Yet none of his calculations ever quite worked out, no matter how carefully he observed the planet's movements.

**In the end, he abandoned the idea in favor of another: the Elliptical Orbit, and the formulas he invented in the last few years of his life are today the basis of every prediction we have ever made about the movements of solar bodies. **

In 1961, the Russians put a man in Earth's orbit. In 1969, the Americans put a man on the moon. The two voyager missions were launched into our solar system, and they spent a considerable time looping around the orbits of our various planets, taking amazing pictures and gathering vast amounts of data. Just a month ago we landed the Rosetta spacecraft on a passing comet. We have a permanent space station in orbit, and are currently planning a manned mission to Mars. None of these ventures would be possible if three-hundred years ago when the evidence didn't fit his hypothesis, Johannes Kepler had been unwilling to throw away his life's work and start again from scratch. That is the legacy of a very brave man, and a true scientist.

On a final note, I bought HTTYD 2 on Blu-ray. In the dragon facts, it says that Toothless can move faster than the speed of sound. That is to say, he can cover over a kilometer of ground every three seconds. This means that in fact his most devastating attack would be the sonic boom which follows in his wake. This is an interesting fact. I plan to revisit it at a later date. It also means that for Hiccup and Toothless, Artemisia's townhome is mere minutes from Alexandria. He could truly take her anywhere.

13. Chapter 13

Prodigal Son 13

Astrid burst through the door of her home, and headed immediately towards the back wall where her modest chest sat. Every Hofferson had one. In an overcrowded home where even beds were shared, everyone

needed a place to put their own personal belongings. Astrid didn't own much. A few changes of clothing, a sheep skin cloak with a deep hood, a few small weapons, her shield, and a set of thick cloth armor. Astrid didn't waste her time with heavy chainmail or iron plates. Those slowed her down far too much, and they absorbed heat. She had watched a warrior or two get cooked inside his own armor. It looked like a painful death. She dressed quickly, strapping on her knee pads, and throwing her cloak over her shoulders.

She grabbed Fishlegs satchel and pulled out the loose papers, throwing them into the chest, replacing them with a few buns and some salted fish which she had wrapped carefully. She was just hefting her shield when she heard a few steps behind her.

"Astrid?"

She turned. Her mother was standing by her bed watching her.

"Stoick's leading a counter-attack." Astrid declared. "In half an hour we sail for Helheim's gate."

Brunhilda winced, small muscles working at the back of her jaw. She said, I'll make a sacrifice for you." She was a hard woman. A mother, a wife, and a warrior. It was rare to see her looking at all shaken. But Astrid could see the worry in her eyes.

"I'm coming back, mum."

"I know." Brunhilda didn't sound convinced. She strode forward and put her hand over Astrid's as the younger woman tightened her grip on her axe. With her other hand, Brunhilda stroked her daughter's hair and drew her into a hug. "Justâ€| never let go of this weapon."

"Of course not." Astrid replied. "How else am I supposed to kill dragons?"

Brunhilda chuckled and held her daughter at arm's length, looking her up and down. "Not just that. If youâ€| You're a great warrior, Astrid. Your father and I are very proud of you."

Astrid felt a bubble of warmth rise in her chest, and allowed herself to take a little pride in her mother's praise. "Thanks mum."

"Justâ€| have a care, alright?" Brunhilda's gaze was drawn downwards to a piece of paper lying beside the open chest. Astrid's heart leapt into her mouth as she realized that it was Hiccup's sketch. The one she had taken from Stoick's home. It had flown loose from the pile when she had flung his papers into her chest.

Brunhilda bent down and picked it up, frowning curiously. She cracked a smile when she read the note underneath. "Where did you get this?"

"It was Hiccup's."

"Of course it was. Who else would have drawn this? Snotlout?"
Brunhilda held the paper up to the light, giving it a thorough examination. "Look at the detail!" she flashed her daughter a smile.

"He really captured you, Astrid."

"I know." She whispered.

Brunhilda shot her a look. "Where did you find this?"

"Gobber had a collection of Hiccup's drawings." Astrid said as casually as she could manage.

They stared at each other, Brunhilda's smile fading. She said, "Where did you actually get it, Astrid?"

"Gobber's forge."

Her mother's eyes narrowed. "Don't forget that I raised you, girl. Don't think I don't know when you're lying."

For a moment, Astrid wondered whether or not to tell the truth. Whether her mother would understand, would be able to handle what she and Fishlegs- wellâ€¦ mostly Fishlegs- had figured out. The Hofferson clan had lost many good men and women to the Dragons including Astrid's beloved uncle, Finn. But if she admitted where it came from, that she had broken into the chief's home, it would bring shame to the Hofferson clan. Astrid felt a great tug upon her heart strings as she realized how badly she wanted her mother's last thoughts of her to be positive.

Brunhilda's fears were justified; every expedition to Helheim's gate had failed, and they had all incurred heavy losses for the village. When Brunhilda had told her to hold on to her axe, it was so that if she were killed, she would end up in Asgard. There was a very real chance Astrid was not coming back, and she wanted to be remembered as an honorable warrior, not a thief. So she stuck her chin out defiantly and snatched the paper away, carefully rolling it up so as not to smear or damage the sketch. She placed it carefully in the chest and then shut the lid. "I've got to go, mum."

Brunhilda's eyes lingered on the closed container, but she sighed. "Alright. We'll talk when you get back."

"Yeahâ€¦" Astrid pulled her mother into a last, tight hug. Then she hefted her shield and walked out with her head held high. She could feel Brunhilda's gaze on the back of her neck.

* * *

><p>Astrid hopped off the dock and into the longship. She kept her feet even as it creaked and swayed against the wooden pier. The boat was stocked with minimal supplies, so as to not take too much from Berk's storehouses. It was full of heavily armed Viking warriors wearing grim but determined faces. One or two of her distant cousins were there.</p>

Astrid crept light-footed from bench to bench. She cringed as Snotlout nodded to her from the bow, and threw her a wink. Instead she slipped into the only other remaining seat: beside Tuffnut. Astrid leaned over him and strapped her shield into place beside the others. She took her seat as the inside oarsmen. She had never had much to do with Tuffnut. He had a reputation for being rather dim. Oddly enough it was something Astrid doubted. His fascination with

death and destruction â€“ one he shared with his sister- often caused him to look at situations in a different light from the rest of the villagers, it was true. He was bloodthirsty, but he wasn't stupid.

"I told my mom we were going to Helheim's gate." Tuffnut said conversationally. He was staring up at Berk, looking a little pale.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He said shakily. His hands were constantly shifting their grip on his oar. "Yeah, she said she was scared because those ships never come back. But I said 'Of course they don't, mom. Ships can't sail themselves! They have no brain!' that's what I said." he paused for a moment, looking sullen.

"I'm sure that's what she meant." Astrid managed.

He kicked the hull beside him. "Yeah! Stupid ships!"

"Where's your spear?"

He tapped his foot against it. He had placed it on the floor underneath their rowing benches.

"Just remember: Hold on to that and in a few days' time you'll either be back home, or in Valhalla, drinking with the gods."

"Never gone into a fight without Ruff beforeâ€|"

"Well now she won't be around to distract you from the carnage." Astrid offered awkwardly.

He gave her a blank look, and then grinned. "Yeah. It's gonna be awesome!"

There was a yell from the dock; Stoick the Vast had arrived. Berk's chieftain stood tall, shining in his chainmail. His mighty hammer was gripped tightly in his hand. He bellowed loudly, silencing the four longships. Every warrior turned to look at him.

"My friends, today is a day of reckoning!" Stoick declared. "Today we strike back at the beasts. I am tired of watching our stores get plundered, our warriors slaughtered, and our village burn!"

Unbidden came the image of the young child tottering out of the burning building. Astrid glanced across the dock at Hundolfr Hrolfson who was seated in a different longship. The destitute father had acquired a new mace. He lookedâ€| quite calm, actually. Peaceful.

"I swear on Thor's name, we are going to find their nest. We are going to tear it down, and force them off this archipelago once and for all! Today we sail for Helheim's gate!" Stoick thrust his axe into the air, prompting the crews of the four longships to cheer.

Astrid searched the cliff above the docks. She spotted her mother standing beside Gobber and Fishlegs near the top of the ramp, and waved. Brunhilda's distant shape waved back.

"Shove off." Stoick ordered, hopping into the vessel adjacent to hers. The ships were pushed away from the docks. Astrid gripped her oar, and began to row. She kept her eyes on her home island of Berk until it sank from sight. She wondered for the briefest of moments why it sank as opposed to simply growing smaller, but dismissed the curiosity as quickly as it had arrived. The sails were being unfurled, and she had weapons to sharpen and polish. They would do Thor proud, or die trying.

* * *

><p>They sailed for a day and a night. Helheim's gate was known to every Viking fisherman. What lay beyond it, however, was a mystery. A great unnatural wall of writhing mist stretched across the horizon in an even line, parting the Dragons' territory from that of Men. Around the boats in every direction stretched calm, endless blue waves. Before them lay the oily, thick grey fog. Within it they could see the faint outlines of sharp, rocky outcroppings. Small shapes flitted through the mist, unseen except for their motion.</p>

"Have no fear!" Astrid could hear Stoick's voice from the lead vessel. "We are Thor's chosen warriors!"

The ships' sails were lowered, and everyone took up an oar. They rowed slowly into the mist. The sun dimmed, and silence fell like a blanket as they churned slowly through the mist. Even the constant breaking of waves on rough rock seemed muffled.

Sea stacks and thin rock formations towered over their heads. At the bow, four Vikings used their paddles to steer the ship, pushing it away from the lofty black stone columns. As they drew further into Helheim's Gate, fluttering wings could be heard far above their heads. They could hear the tittering and chirruping of dragons, calls no one had ever heard before, echoing amongst the monoliths.

"Arm yourselves!" Stoick called out.

"Move over!" Astrid hissed, swapping places with Tuffnut. She unfastened her shield from the hull of the ship and slid it onto her arm, gripping her axe in her other hand. The Viking in front of her raised his sword, ready to strike. There was a sudden gust of wind which knocked her back into her seat. The warrior's sword was flying up into the air, hefted aloft by a flitting black shape.

"Hey!" The bereaved Viking shook his fist up at the rapidly vanishing shape, "That was my grandfather's you beast!"

At this pronouncement, the chirruping noises around them increased tenfold. They increased more as every Viking around them hefted weaponry of one kind or another. Berk's tiny fleet was suddenly bristling with metal.

"Steady!" Astrid called out. "Eyes sharp!" Similar calls were being repeated across all four boats. Another moment passed, during which time the nattering around them grew to a crescendo.

The seastacks surrounding them suddenly burst forth with great swarms of dragons. Tiny scaled shapes flitted all around them, stealing weaponry and pulling at the longships' fastenings. Astrid watched

helplessly as a warrior was lifted screaming into the air. His chainmail jangled as eight of the beasts carried him off into the mist. Four more were gathered at Stoick's shoulders, trying to pull him away. She could see him through the mist, standing proudly on the bow of his ship as he crushed the monsters with his hammer.

The swarms writhed and coiled, whirling around each of the longships, thieving weapons from the hands of ready Vikings, and sometimes carrying off shields and helmets. This was useless, she thought as she watched her comrades flail impotently at the flocks. She bellowed an order: "Shield wall!"

Her comrades obeyed immediately. Three-dozen warriors in total, huddled in a tight cluster around the mast. Dragons clawed and clattered uselessly against the shield wall, grasping at the sword tips, which would inevitably thrust out to disembowel them. Their corpses began to pile up, and the deck boards ran red with dragons' blood as the Vikings adjusted their tactics against their foes, gutting any dragon who dared venture down to grip a shield. On the other three ships, other Vikings began to follow their example.

There came a cry from somewhere above them. A chirping call Astrid had been dreading. Nadder fire split the sky, lighting the mast of her longship. The scorched and singed the crew, causing them to turn away. A few arrows were loosed after the beast but it flapped its wings and gracefully vanished into the fog, only to fall upon them again from a different direction. Its fire had broken the Viking's shield wall, and the swarms of smaller dragons fell upon them once again, snatching and grasping at their weapons and armor.

More dragonfire flashed to either side as Gronkles and Nadders began to attack the other ships as well. Their shadows fell across the ships like beams of darkness piercing the fog. Astrid could hear Stoick shouting commands to his troops. Steam began to rise, further obscuring the longships from one another, and preventing any tactical assessment of the battle.

"Reform!" Astrid called out, "Shield wall." She flung open one of the many plunderage chests, and retrieved several arrows and a bow from it. She notched an arrow and backed up until the Viking battle formation swallowed her. A few other archers were there as well, aiming through their covering's small cracks. Astrid took a moment to steady herself, comforted by the closeness and warmth of her battle brothers. They listened to the faint war calls from the other boats, and the constant chittering and flapping of dragon wings. She spotted a larger shadow heading towards the boat, and let fly her arrow. A cry told her she had hit her target, and a large shape crashed into the water beside their boat, breaking half of their oars, and causing the ship to rock and creak. The mast was still aflame. If they survived, the boat would have to be towed back.

Another dragon shrieked above them, and Astrid's heart fell when she recognized it as a Monstrous Nightmare.

"Scatter!" She ordered, even as the Nightmare's flaming spit fell from the sky. Vikings dove out of the way, though one or two were caught in the blaze and leapt overboard, screaming. The Nightmare came down with a screech and spread its wings, coming to a near halt in the air as it eclipsed the sky. It gripped the top of the mast

with its feet and began to pull. Astrid was flung sideways and landed against the gunwhale. She gripped her axe tightly as salt water washed over the back of her neck and down her shoulders. The entire boat was tipping, capsizing under the weight of the Nightmare. All around her, warriors scrambled for handholds.

She gripped a nearby bench and hauled herself to her feet, steadying her stance against the wall of the ship. The nightmare was nearly in front of her now, the longship angled so steeply that water was rushing in over the side, soaking her ankles.

"Sorry, mum." Astrid murmured. She took one last breath, and then lifted her axe over her head and threw it and the monstrous dragon. With a meaty noise it hit the beast in the back of the leg. The Nightmare howled and let go of the mast. The longship righted itself, sending her flying backwards. The back of her head crunched against the hardened wooden frame, and the world drew out of focus. The last thing she heard were the anguished cries of her comrades, and the last thing she saw was a herd of Gronckles descending upon them.

* * *

><p>Only one ship came back from the expedition. The day was pale and grey. Frost still clung to the rough patches of grass. An agonizing week had passed since she had watched four ships vanish over the horizon.</p>

Brunhilda was there when the sorry expedition returned, charred and smoking. The sail was patched in multiple places, sometimes with articles of clothing. She watched as warriors, wounded and grim were helped off the boat and up the steep climb to the village. Their numbers were halved, with three ships lost. One by one they paraded by, singed and bleeding. As the parade passed through the crowd of silent villagers, her heart slowly sank. Yet she kept herself composed.

When she spotted blond hair, her feet carried her forward. Her breath failed as she recognized Tuffnut Thorston, using his spear for support.

"Astridâ€>??" she asked faintly.

He fixed her with a sad look and shook his head, then limped on towards the Thorston hall. The world spun round Brunhilda, a thousand emotions swirling in her chest.

Stoick the Vast brought up the rear, and Brunhilda heard Gobber's question. "Did you find the nest?"

She also heard the Chief's answer. "Not even close."

Later found her in the Hofferson hall, carefully unpacking her daughter's belongings. She found a few childhood toys. A change of clothes, Astrid's first axe, a small skirt, a doll... Very little. So very little to remember her by.

Hiccup's sketch of Astrid was lying on her bed. Brunhilda faintly pondered the origins of this unexpected object, yet dismissed it; to think of it was to prod an open wound. Instead she drew her knees up, clutched her lost child's axe, and resolutely refused to cry.

She gritted her teeth, realizing that she would never wake up to see her daughter dressing for the day. At noon, Astrid would no longer be leading the new trainees on a jog through Berk. She would never see her daughter training again. There were a thousand experiences, entire chapters of her life which had closed so very suddenly. Regrets swam through the sea grief. She should have tried to stop Astrid from going, though she knew there was no way she ever could have. Astrid had been determined. Stoic. Certainly infected with that famous Viking stubbornness.

Loss was a part of Viking life. Especially on Berk. Brunhilda had lost her father, two brothers, and multiple cousins and uncles to the Dragons and the Outcasts and occasionally the harshness of the climate. But she came to the stunning realization that she had never expected Astrid to be among that number. It had seemed so incomprehensible an idea. She had never worried for her daughter like she had for other members of her family. Astrid had always been so solid. A rock steadfast in the face of life's ferocious waves. A duty and a favor Brunhilda hoped she had managed to return.

Her gaze once again fell upon Hiccup's sketch, and she traced every careful stroke. How that talented young man had captured Astrid's essence. Her ferocity and determination. Brunhilda rose to her feet and gently picked up the sketch. She walked out the door and wandered Berk's familiar paths until at last she came upon the Haddock Hall.

She knocked once, twice, three times. The door was opened promptly to reveal Stoick's vast bulk. The man was holding a large block of ice to his temple. He looked exhausted, and Brunhilda could see new reddened burn marks on his arms, and scratches all over his shoulders. Blood trickled from a small cut on the side of his head.

"Brunhilda." He greeted, his voice tired and rough, but still polite.

"Chief Stoick." She replied, Astrid's tiny axe was still hanging loosely at her side.

"I uh-huh." His eyes flickered towards the axe. "I was going to come by later and offer my condolences. Astrid we would not have made it as far as we did without her. She fought well."

"Of course she did." Brunhilda said shakily. She raised the drawing and handed it to him. "I found this in her things. Hiccup drew it, right?"

Stoick's mouth had gone slack, his eyes wide with shock. He extended a trembling hand. "Where did you?"

"It was in her things." Brunhilda repeated, suddenly feeling very tired.

He shot her a suspicious look, his eyes narrowed.

"I felt it should be returned" she began.

"Yes. Thanks." The man was puffing repeatedly as he stared down at

the picture. "In her things, you said?"

She nodded, picking up a certain anger in his tone. "Chief, if anything has happened—"

"Nothing!" He was snarling now, red-faced. "If you find any more of my son's sketches in your daughter's things, I will expect them returned to their rightful owner immediately! Good day!"

The door slammed shut in her face. If she had not felt so out of sorts with exhaustion, she would have pursued the issue. She didn't appreciate the unspoken accusation in his tone.

* * *

><p>Astrid felt sand between her fingertips. It was on her cheek as well, and in her hair. She even felt like someone had stuffed her head full of sand, given how difficult it was to formulate anything approaching rational thoughts. A muffled thumping noise echoed in her skull, as if she were underwater listening as waves slammed into a sea stack. Water was lapping at her knees, and she could smell the stench of rotting seaweed. She cracked an eyelid open and beheld a raven.</p>

The enormous bird was perched on a large rock a meter from her. Sunlight reflected from its sleek black feathers. She gazed up at it through half-lidded eyes. "Are you Huginn, or Muninn?"

The raven squawked loudly and tilted its head at her.

"Get out of here." She ordered hoarsely, "Go tell Odin I'm not dead yet!"

It squawked one last time and took off, beating the air with its wings as it rose and disappeared.

Astrid shut her eyes and rested a moment, building up some strength. Her head was pounding, her thoughts muddy, her memories jumbled. She rolled onto her back and cried out weakly. Her eyes were closed, but the sun still pierced her eyelids making her moan and turn her head away in protest.

Time passed, and her eyes adjusted, though the process went much more slowly than usual. The beach was yellow sand, rough and hot. Beyond it was sandstone, coloured in greys, reds and browns. Astrid slowly made her way up the beach, crawling at first but eventually she gathered the strength to force herself to her feet. She stumbled past the high-tide line, marked with rotting seaweed and thin, bone-white chunks of driftwood.

Somewhere in the distance, she could hear the distressed calls of a Deadly Nadder, carried on the wind.

Facing the sea, she took a seat on a boulder. Almost perfectly spherical in shape, it jutted a good two feet out of the sandstone, as if the gods had dropped a marble into the earth. Around it were several shorter flat rocks, fairly wide. As she watched, a small crab scuttled from one of them into the shelter underneath another. Beyond them was the blue ocean, looking fairly calm. But no other land masses were in sight. She wondered where she was.

Astrid sniffed and took stock. Her right side was aching madly. Her knees, elbows, and shoulders were sore, though her left knee was throbbing particularly badly. She sported several bruises on her arms and an enormous goose egg at the back of her head. The aching in her side was the worst though, and she wanted to see the damage first hand. Astrid gingerly began to undo the straps holding on her leather cuirass, but found her progress impeded by a leather strap. She followed it down to find a satchel at her waist.

It was fine quality leather, carefully oiled. Her memory slowly pieced events together. It was Fishlegs' satchel! He had given it to her before they'd shipped out. She had been wearing it during the battle at Helheim's gate.

She unslung it and opened it up, pouring a few cups of seawater onto the sand. Inside were a few changes of clothing, soaked, and a few slices of salted fish, carefully wrapped and dripping wet. Another object slid out and landed on the dry sand; Hiccup's journal. It too was soaked, but through some ungodly miracle, the ink had not run.

Astrid laid it out on one of the flat stones, using smaller pebbles to prop the pages open, allowing the offshore breeze to sift through them and dry them out faster. She would need the paper for kindling, and it was no good wet.

She kept the salted fish in its wrapping, placing a rock over it to prevent the more adventurous seagulls from snatching it away; for all she knew, it was to be her only food source for quite a while. She also used a few small pieces of bleached driftwood to prop the oiled satchel open, allowing it to dry as well.

She continued to undress, grunting at the minor aches and pains which accompanied the removal of her cuirass and her undershirt. She lay her wraps and undergarments aside as well, sitting half-naked on the rock as she waited for them to dry. The salt, of course, would make them stiff and uncomfortable. She hoped to find a freshwater stream somewhere on her new island, not only for drinking but also for washing. She leaned over to examine herself more closely. Her left side was a blotchy mess of angry blue bruises with yellowing edges. She was sore, but sure that nothing was broken.

Astrid pulled a small emergency knife from her boot. She had lost her axe, her shield, and all other weaponry. The knife was no good for killing. Its blade was perhaps three inches long. Not enough to kill a dragon, but for woodworking and preparing dead animals it would come in handy.

Astrid could see no trees on the island, but there was wood. Specifically, the bleached driftwood which lined the beaches. Some pieces were large enough for a fire, but all were far too small to lash together for a raft. Not that she had the rope. There were logs as well, too heavy for her to move. Even if she found the rope, and lashed them together, her clothing was threadbare, far too thin to construct an effective sail.

She wandered down the beach a kilometer or two, staying on sandstone as much as possible to avoid tiring herself out on the soft sand. She did find fresh water on the far side of a large spit. It couldn't

even be called a creek, really. Merely moisture which ran down a sandstone slope and disappeared into the sandy beach. Several natural shallow caves had been hewn from the soft sandstone by years of waves and weather erosion. They sat well above the tide-line, and were filled with small chunks of bleached driftwood.

The sun crawled higher in the sky as she wandered three more kilometers, arriving at what she reckoned to be the far side of the island. She felt a surge of excitement as she caught sight of a distant landmass on the horizon. Once again, she could hear the calls of a Nadder, somewhere down the beach. She kept going, staying low as she moved fluidly around the rim of the bay. As she traveled, the squawking and chirping grew in volume. She reached a rocky outcropping and peered around it.

Beyond was an enormous pile of wood. Splintered timber from one of Berk's longships. Rigging and lines crisscrossed the waterlogged wreck, half-submerged. A little further up the bank was a Nadder, lying on its side, tangled in the rigging. It had somehow tangled one of its wings in the ship's sail. There was a spear embedded in its side. It was not a deep wound, but it would be fatal if not dealt with. As she watched, the Nadder raised its head and let out a troubled wail.

Breathing hard, Astrid pulled back and leaned against the rocky wall. She gripped her knife tightly. It was far too small to kill the dragon. And even on its side, the beast was still capable of breathing fire and shooting its poisonous spines. Yet she needed to get past it, to the timber. She needed the sail fabric which was wrapped around its wings. She searched the sea and surrounding area for bodies. Weapons. Wreckage. Anything she could use to kill the beast, and came up empty.

Grimacing with disappointment, she wandered back along the beaches. A four-kilometer hike to the place where she had washed ashore. Her supplies were still there. Her shirt and undergarments were dry, and stiff as boards, but she wrapped her chest up and slipped her shirt on anyway, thankful for the shade; her bare back had been exposed to the sun for several hours.

The fish fillets were warm, and infested with flies, but she ate one anyway. She carried the leather satchel over to the trickling water she had found. She dug a shallow hole there, and chopped some stiff grass stalks, placing them in such a way as to allow moisture to flow into the oiled satchel. With any luck there would be drinking water there the following morning.

Then, with the setting sun before her, Astrid settled down to think. She needed the lumber. She needed the rigging. She needed the sail. She needed to get past that wounded dragon. It would bleed out and die eventually. But would she still be alive by that time? Would she still have the strength to build a raft and set sail? Berk was part of an archipelago. This was not the first time a Viking had been shipwrecked. She could survive. Hop from island to island. Perhaps make it home, hug her mum and get a new axe.

But first she needed to get past the dragon.

Her gaze fell upon Hiccup's journal. Damp, but dry enough to handle. The boy certainly had a way with the beasts if he had managed to ride

a Night Fury.

How to Train Your Dragon by Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third

Astrid flipped the front cover open and started down the first page. "Alright, Haddock," she grumbled, "we tried our way. Now let's see what you can do."

* * *

><p>This story is finally starting to take shape!

In terms of renaming the story, the overwhelming majority of people seemed to think I should keep it the same, so I will. Even so, I appreciate all of your commentary, and all of your suggestions for other possible names.

The meeting between Brunhilda and Stoick was originally very different, and I hated it. They were both out of character, and terribly mean to each other for no good reason. I wrestled with it for quite a while before finally deleting a fair chunk of the chapter and starting again. There was almost nothing salvageable. I'm still not entirely satisfied with the result, but I had to move on, or stall out. Don't you hate it when that happens?

As always, I love to hear your thoughts, good or bad.

Cheers,

-CC

14. Chapter 14

Prodigal Son 14

"Where are we going, Hiccup?"

"The library."

"Ah." Artemisia collected the furs which Hiccup had insisted she wear and gathered them more tightly around herself. "And, what is the bag of fish for?"

Hiccup adjusted the sack which was strung around his shoulder.
"Motivation."

"You're being awfully cryptic tonight." Artemisia probed lightly.

The city was relatively quiet that evening. The city guards were patrolling quite heavily in order to discourage any potential counter-riots, but everyone seemed inclined to stay indoors anyway. Noise could be heard from the markets and the docks a few blocks over, but that wasn't Hiccup and Artemisia's destination.

The Library loomed in the distance, a bulky pale shape against the

clouded night sky. They wound through the nearly empty streets of Alexandria. A beggar waylaid them once, and was driven off by a few small coins from Artemisia's purse. Beggars were quite common in Alexandria. A byproduct of the wealth the city generated.

"It is sad." Hiccup observed.

"What is?"

"You'd think we could do more for them." Hiccup said.

"We could." Artemisia answered shortly. "The nobles in this city, myself included, have enough money to feed, clothe and house everyone in this city."

"Then why don't you all band together?"

"Because in our civilization, gold is valued more than the well-being of others." Artemisia explained shortly. "In most cases, at any rate. Plato once wrote that the greatest wealth is the ability to live content with little. He thought that the pursuit of wealth in lieu of good deeds and moral virtue was one of the worst crimes a capable man could commit. As for myself, I have plenty of income from a variety of investments and sources. All of it is given to the upkeep of Alexandria's Library, and my school. That is a step along the way. One day society will not be so blind. One day we'll see the wisdom of Plato's theoretical system. One day good and wise men, raised and taught in special Academies will rule. A kingdom ruled by a Philosopher is better off than a kingdom ruled by any species of politician. The reason for this is that a philosopher understands that money and power are a means to enact lasting and effective social change. A politician does not. He does what is best for himself and for those who fund his campaigns. Perhaps for his friends and allies if he is a generous politician. But only a philosopher will do what is best for his people."

They reached the library a few minutes later. Its regal columns towered over their heads. A wide gravel pathway lead through a well-groomed garden, and up to the foot of the building's marble stairs.

A circular fountain lay at the center of the path. The statue was a depiction of a man lying spread against a boulder, chained to it. An eagle, its wings spread, was on his lap, pecking at a wound in his side from which water poured continuously into the pool below.

"Prometheus!" Hiccup exclaimed, recognizing the figure. Hiccup only wandered through the front door of the library once. Usually he saw it from above. He said, "Prometheus stole fire from the gods to give to humanity."

"Not just fire, but knowledge and understanding of the world. Prometheus was a titan. A Greek god who knew the value of knowledge, and paid his price for it willingly. Your Norse god Odin gave up his eye for knowledge. The power of knowledge, and its price, is a theme you'll find common amongst almost all religions. Even Christianity. Eve bit the apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil."

"I always thought that was a metaphor forâ€¢|you knowâ€¢|" Hiccup

rubbed the back of his neck. He could feel himself blushing. "Sex. And whatnot."

"It could be." She allowed. "But what if by biting the apple, Eve gave human beings the ability to reason and think about morality independent of God's influence. What if that action allowed us to step away from Him. Sex produces children but it is reason and understanding which gives us agency in life. If Eve's actions gave Man that ability before God thought we were readyâ€| it would explain His anger afterwards far better than anger at some slight indiscretion. The true price of knowledge is responsibility. Towards oneself, and towards others."

"I suppose."

Artemisia smiled. "Have you ever been on a proper tour of the Library of Alexandria?"

"Nothing formal."

She gestured at the staircase, and the enormous white marble pillars. "What's the first thing you notice?"

"It'sâ€| fancy. Prestigious."

"Hiccupâ€|" Artemisia said, frowning. "You can do better than that. What does the inscription above the door say?"

His gaze turned to the ancient, carefully carved Greek lettering on the lintel. "It says 'Let only the inquisitive enter here'. Makes sense. After all, it's a library."

"Not only. It is an Academy. A place where philosophers, poets and thinkers go to learn, to teach, and to ply their respective crafts." She strode confidently up the marble stairs and under the shelter of the pillared overhang.

"Ummâ€| it's usually closed this time of night." Hiccup warned.

His teacher raised an eyebrow. "And how then did you intend to enter it?"

"Oh, I dunnoâ€|" he shrugged, rubbing the back of his neck. "Carefully?"

She smirked and knocked six times on the thick wooden doors. The doors themselves were ornate, with faces carved in the likeness of the great Greco-Roman thinkers, and above them, a young Alexander the Great, striking a heroic pose. Artemisia pointed him out to Hiccup. "That's the man who founded this place."

"Alexander, I know."

"Do you? You know he planned this city. You know he planned this library, but where did the concept come from, Hiccup? You're looking at the leaves, but what are the roots? The concept of an Academy is very simple. It is the physical manifestation of the Parable of Plato's Cave. This is where chains are broken, Hiccup. This is where we learn to look at the world through a new light. This is where truth is found, where fact overrules fiction. Any society that wants

to thrive needs to be fluid. Where we encounter problems, solutions must be found. Barbarity and ignorance must be countered with truth and measured discussion. This is progress, Hiccup. This is where leaders are made, and futures forged. Those Philosopher Kings I mentioned, they are made here. Trained to understand the world, and with that knowledge comes the responsibility of running it."

A panel on the door slid back, revealing flickering light and the dark skinned, stern, bearded night guard whom Hiccup had thus far always managed to avoid. "I told you, before: Night time visitors aren'tâ€ Oh, Ma'am."

"Just leading a student through, Erastes." She reported pleasantly.

"Yes Ma'am." His face vanished, and Hiccup heard bolts sliding back. Then the door opened. Hiccup had entered through the front door of the library on his first day in Alexandria, though back then he knew the city as Eskendereyya. The Library was no less awe-inspiring on the second visit. Ahead of them lay a wide corridor, lit with oil lamps, each flame carefully sheltered to protect the dry volumes of literature. Rows of wooden shelves, each ending with a marble column, stretched out ahead of him. On each shelf were dozens of rolls of papyrus. He could see the shadows of more bookcases on the mezzanines which stretched for another two stories above his head. A great distance ahead of him, moonlight shone down through the central glass dome, down upon a statue.

They walked slowly down the central aisle until they were standing at its base. Artemisia paused there. All round her stretched wings and galleries with shelf upon shelf upon shelf of scrolls and precious tomes. "Just take a moment, Hiccup. Stand here with me."

Before them, at the intersection between the four wide hallways, facing the front door was the enormous marble statue of Alexander the Great, riding a rearing white horse. Hiccup stared up at the chiseled, smooth features. In the conqueror's raised hand he wielded not a sword, but a scroll. Three stories above their heads was the enormous glass dome which lit the library. Hiccup recognized it. For months, he had slipped through a loose panel at its base, and into the library to read after dark. At midday, Hiccup knew that the sun would shine down upon Alexander's statue, making it glow with a brilliant light. An inscription had been chiseled at the base of the statue.

"Ignorance is the root and stem of all evil." Hiccup read.

"One of Plato's best quotes." Artemisia said, "This Library is supposed to contain all the knowledge of all the world. Even now, eleven hundred years later, it is still a revolutionary idea. Aristotle's great addition to Philosophy was giving us the tools needed to organize and categorize not only our thoughts and arguments, but the physical world around us. His systems were instrumental in shaping the design and organization of this institution. His pupil, Alexander, spread Greek culture throughout all the known world, and along with it, Aristotle's philosophy. He founded cities all across his conquered territory, but Alexandria was his favorite, and by far the largest."

"When he died, his three generals took control of his massive empire.

The one we're most concerned with was Ptolemy, who took control of Egypt and became a respected ruler in his own right: Ptolemy the First, of Soter. His line controlled the throne of Egypt for centuries, until -"

"Until the death of Cleopatra." Hiccup supplied helpfully. "I've read of the civil war between Augustus Caesar and Mark Antony."

"Very good!" Artemisia congratulated. "But our story, and the founding of this library, revolves around Ptolemy of Soter, and his efforts to retain Greek culture. Alexander was dead, but his empire had spread Greek culture across new lands including Egypt. Without their emperor, the Greek elites including Ptolemy, needed a way to retain their culture, and to keep the empire intact. They needed to maintain Alexander's symbols and the way they chose to do this was to make his crown jewel, Alexandria, Egypt's greatest city. And they did, thanks in large part, to the founding and maintenance of this very Library.

"Books were taken from everywhere. Homes were searched. Incoming ships were held at dock and searched from top to bottom. Books were borrowed or bought at great price from neighboring kingdoms, and usually never returned. A war was fought, not with steel, but with minds. Knowledge was sought and hoarded, each ruler trying to know and understand more than any other because it was known in Greek culture that thorough knowledge lead to superior leadership. Armies of scribes, priests, and librarians worked day and night to read through all the material. Those of any value, whether historical, technical, or literary, were kept and organized according to their content. Any piece of information you seek, large or small. Foundation shaking, or irrelevant. The most likely place you'll be able to find it is here. You are standing in the brain of civilization."

Hiccup looked around at the dark shelves and upper galleries. His voice echoed loudly through the halls as he said, "It seems kinda empty."

Artemisia tried and failed to suppress a snicker. "I'll admit that knowledge is useless without intelligent people there to make good use of it. But I can assure you that at midday, when those front doors open, this library is bustling with activity. Some of the greatest inquisitive minds in the world gather here, in this library, and at the museo attached to it."

"Museo?"

"A place of learning, similar to my academy in the Agora, but larger." Artemisia grinned. "It has a cafeteria and an Amphitheatre and few other additions."

"And that's where you go to get taught." Hiccup guessed.

"To debate." Artemisia clarified. "This is where you go after you've graduated from my classes. But come, follow me." She led him through a few aisles, all of which looked the same aside from carefully placed numbers and letters which marked each shelf.

"Ahh!" she declared happily, "Here we are!" she pulled an old scroll from a shelf at random and unfurled it to reveal a long chart, full

of numbers. "Five years of grain shipments from Egypt. From years seven hundred and four to seven hundred and nine."

Hiccup chuckled. "Wow. Why is that in here?"

Artemisia gestured around here. "This entire set of shelves contains lists of shipping receipts for all kinds of goods across the empire. I know it may seem like a strange choice to keep such things, but they are relevant. When you chart these numbers, Hiccup, one can see the fluctuation and movement of goods across centuries of business. All of the ups and downs, the famines and the wars. Our entire history is reflected in these receipts. One can use that data to predict and prepare his population for famines, and calculate the economic impacts of wars. One can plan ahead using data available on a massive scale never before seen by any ruler.

"War is exciting, and in exciting times, one desires generals and conquerors. Leaders who are military strategists. But even in wars, armies must be fed and watered. Weapons and equipment must be manufactured and moved. In both peace and war, an intelligent leader makes use of data to inform his choices as ruler. As boring and irrelevant as a single scroll may seem to us here tonight, these simple charts can make or break armies and nations. That is why this data has been kept."

"It is strange that two floors up, one can find plays and poems."

"Is it? Plato actually held a very low opinion of the arts, but I thoroughly disagree with him. All of the lists and data one can find down here are pointless unless they are used for the greater purpose of creating art. Adding beauty and advancing culture. The arts are an end worth pursuing. It is fitting that poetry and great works of fiction are placed on the floors above the regular maintenance of a kingdom. One is necessary for the other to thrive."

"Has the library ever fallen on hard times?" Hiccup asked. "How has it lasted for eleven hundred years?"

"In the past, the Roman empire suffered from considerable turbulence. Rome controlled Alexandria after the Ptolemy's, and not all the Emperors were as friendly to the library and its ideas as Ptolemy was, and for a time it had to rely on the private donations of people like me. Thankfully there were enough of us to see it through. Many of our emperors helped to rebuild it, and our current emperor Leo supports us now, with assistance from private donors. It is important to civilization to keep this institution open, not just as a library, but as an Academy. A place of learning."

"Why did the Emperors support the library?"

"I think some believed in its ideals, but there is a far more practical reason: As with all new dynasties, it is important to set up symbols for the public to identify with you. What symbols you choose dictate what kind of ruler they feel you're going to be. It says a lot that he chose to uphold this institution."

"Sounds like they were smart men."

"Indeed. They were very good at playing with public sympathies. For

instance it was said that if Charlemagne had known he was going to be crowned Emperor, he would never have walked into Church that morning."

"Do you think that's true?"

"Unlikely." Artemisia said thoughtfully. "But it always looks good when one is modest about power. As a ruler you want people to identify with you and support you. Charlemagne tried very much to build a Christian kingdom run on the principles of the Old Testament. He had the authority and legitimacy of his God, which is always helpful. But far more practical is the permission and approval of the people he was ruling. People are less apprehensive about a ruler, even an utterly brutal one, when they feel he is a pious, god-fearing man. And they'll fear a tyrant more if they think he's got the wrath of a god on his side."

She paused a moment, and her eyes fell on the bag of fish which Hiccup was toting. "Enough of this." She said, "You said you had something to show me?"

* * *

><p>They were at the rickety ladder which lead to the library's roof. Hiccup took a deep breath and hesitated, gripping the bottom rungs of the ladder. It had seemed so simple when he'd been standing in her study. It had seemed so very straightforward. Introduce Toothless to Artemisia. The two most important people in his life. The things the three of them could accomplish. He knew it would help. He knew Toothless could help with her work. Toothless had been so very good. So very well-behaved. The dragon had grown sluggish in Alexandria's hotter climate. He spent the days sleeping, usually. During the nighttime, he was always waiting patiently at the top of the ladder, always ready to ride and adventure. Ready to fly for endless miles, as fast as they could go.</p>

Hiccup loved flying with Toothless. But he also loved Alexandria, and Artemisia's classes. He felt like he had finally found a place. A calling. He was Philosopher. Someone who devoted his life to exploring the thinking and learning, like Artemisia. She was always so sure of herself, and her opinions. She argued with priests and questioned gods.

These things were easy to do, though, when sitting safely in a classroom. He knew that she had never seen a dragon before. Would she approach Toothless with fear and mistrust as every single other person on the planet had before her? Or would she stick to her principles? Would she withhold judgment, and wait until she got to know Toothless. They would get along. Hiccup knew they would. She just had to give the dragon a chance to prove himself.

And if she didn't? If she fled back down the ladder? If she went to Martius to tell him everythingâ€¦?

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Hiccup?" Artemisia asked gently.

"I just realizedâ€¦" he murmured, swallowing. "If this doesn't work outâ€¦ I'm going to have to leave Alexandria."

"Well in that case we're just going to have to make it work, won't we?" she shot back. "Besides. I already suspect a lot."

"Youâ€| you do?"

"You've brought fish along. I take it you're harboring some kind of animal up there. It can be ridden, but it is not a horse else you would keep it in a stable. You told me it could go above the clouds, so it can fly. How am I doing?"

He gave her a crooked smile. "Pretty good so far."

"Whatever it is, it will surprise me." She said confidently. "If it was something commonly seen, you wouldn't be hiding it on top of the tallest building in the city."

"It's a He." Hiccup supplied. "His name is Toothless."

"Toothless? Well that just makes me all the more curious." She motioned to the ladder. "Start climbing, Master Haddock."

Hiccup did so, and a moment later, he was standing on the roof of the greatest library in the world. The city of Alexandria was spread out before him, its streets forming a web of bright, spidery lines. Off in the distance, across the harbor, he could see the Pharos Lighthouse, with its burning beacon, the city's symbol of hope and comfort.

The rooftop before him was barren.

Toothless?" he said uncertainly. He slung the bag of fish off his back and it landed at his knee. Artemisia was at his shoulder, having clambered up after him.

"It's a beautiful view up here." She observed.

Behind them, there was a faint, leathery noise.

Artemisia turned first, and all Hiccup heard was her voice, weak with shock. "Oh dearâ€|"

He turned, pulling a fish out of his bag. Toothless and Artemisia were staring eye to eye, the dragon's sleek black head less than a foot from her nose. Her eyes were wide, and the dragon's were slightly wider; a good sign on Toothless' part at least. Hiccup carefully slipped a raw fish into her hand.

"You'll need this." He said.

Toothless crooned curiously and took a step forward. She stumbled back, but regained her footing, still staring at the sleek black shape.

"Ohâ€| dearâ€|" she said again. Artemisia held the raw fish loosely in her palm, standing stock still as the dragon sniffed every inch of her, up and down. Toothless sat back on his haunches and sneezed twice; the woman's perfume had tickled his nose. Then, blinking rapidly, the dragon gave her an expectant look, his round green eyes flickering between her face and the fish in her hand.

"Hiccupâ€|?" Artemisia whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

"Hold it out to him." Hiccup said encouragingly. "He'll eat it. He'll eat anything."

The dragon shot him an indignant huff and returned his attention to the philosopher. Artemisia was still fixed like a statue, trying to master her very real fear. Fed up with waiting, Toothless used his tail to bat the fish out of her hand. He snapped it out of the air as it flew upwards, his muscled jaws clamping shut right beside her ear. The sound lay somewhere between the clop of a horse's hoof, and a thunderclap. Yet it made clear the fact that anything caught between those jaws was mincemeat.

Artemisia shrieked and fell to the side. Once again, Toothless began to sniff at her. She crawled away across the roof, the dragon lumbering after her until her back was pressed against one of the great domes of the library.

The dragon plopped himself down on his tail, sitting upright with his head tilted quizzically to the side as he examined Artemisia. He opened his mouth to reveal toothless gums, and regurgitated half of the fish into her lap.

"Ahâ€| yeahâ€| sorry about thisâ€|" Hiccup said awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck.

Artemisia sat in stunned silence, staring down at the slimy carcass which was slowly soaking her robes.

"Toothless, budâ€| not everyone likes eating raw fish like you do."

Toothless' head snapped sideways and he fixed Hiccup with a wide-eyed look of disbelief.

"I'm serious!"

Toothless rolled his eyes.

"It's not healthy for us, bud! We'll take it with us. She'll eat it, I promise, but will you at least let me cook it over a fire?"

The dragon glared at him, clearly scandalized by the idea. He turned his attention back to Artemisia, who was caught in a three-way tug of war between amazement, amusement, and confusion. She said, "Hiccup, what does this mean? With the fish?"

"He ahâ€| he wants you to eat it. It's how he makes friends. You know what," Hiccup squared his shoulders. "No. this isn't happening, bud. I'm sorry but no."

Toothless growled in protest. Hiccup made a move to grab the half-eaten fish, and found himself suddenly flat on his back as the dragon's powerful tail batted him away.

"It's alrightâ€|" Artemisia said bravely. "I'll eat it." Cringing, she used her fingernails to scrap away a patch of scales, then she

raised the fish to her mouth and took a bit out of its flank. She held the raw meat in her mouth and gazed hopefully up at Toothless as her cheeks slowly turned green.

Toothless watched her like a hawk. He waited for a few seconds, then prompted her with a gulping noise. The philosopher's face drooped, but she cringed and managed to force it down.

Satisfied, the dragon fell onto all fours and spun around to Hiccup, his tail coming dangerously close to smashing a few of the dome's windows.

Hiccup reached over and hugged toothless' neck, bury his face happily in the dragon's scales, scratching furiously in all the dragon's favorite places. "It's good to see you again, Bud! I missed you so much!"

His dragon replied with a contented crooning noise.

Artemisia rose to her feet, her gaze still fixed on Toothless.
"â€|Hiccup?"

Hiccup could still hear the shock in her voice. He untangled himself and grinned as Toothless wrapped himself around him, crooning and yammering happily. "Artemisia, I'd like you to meet Toothless, the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. He likes fish, Haddock more than cod. He loves dragon nip, interesting smells, and having his back scratched right between his wings. Just like this!" He dove happily onto Toothless, and scratched furiously, causing the dragon to arch his back, grinning a gummy grin, and rumbling in pleasure.

"Back scratchâ€|" Artemisia said weakly, her hands hanging loosely by her sides.

"Well yeah. He can't reach that part himself." Hiccup grinned at Toothless. "Or he's just lazy. Honestly, bud. What the hell is that tail for, anyway? You make me do all the work."

Said tail gave him a firm thwack across his back. He responded instantly by throwing himself on the dragon, trying to wrestle the large creature to the ground.

"Of course he can'tâ€|" she took a few deep breaths and sank back against the dome, watching Toothless and Hiccup as they tussled.
"That's a dragon, Hiccup."

Hiccup had managed to get on Toothless' back, and was busy holding the dragon's wings down. Straining with the effort, he grunted, "Well spotted."

Toothless' wings unfurled, sending him flailing to the ground. The dragon pounced immediately, showering him with licks.

"Alright, alright, alright, bud! You win! You win! I'm happy to see you too. Blech, yuck!" Hiccup pushed Toothless off him, and stumbled to his feet, steadyng himself against his best friend's nose. He gave Artemisia another lopsided grin. "Yeahâ€| soâ€|" he gestured at Toothless, who sat back and assumed a very regal pose, his head held high.

"Tah-dah." Said Hiccup. A few droplets of saliva fell from his soaked robes and pattered onto the roof.

Feeling slightly more confident, Artemisia took a few steps forward.
"Can I can I touch him?"

"Grab another fish first." Hiccup told her. She obeyed.

"Good." Hiccup stood back and watched carefully as the Dragon approached her. Toothless was down on all fours, slinking like a cat, low to the ground as he eyed the fish.

"Keep it back." Hiccup instructed, "Extend your other hand, palm towards him. If he wants the fish, he's going to have to bond with you. Don't give him the fish until he presses his nose into your hand. Then you know you're allowed to pet him."

Toothless shot him a glare.

"Oh, come off it, Bud. This is Artemisia. She's a friend of mine, and you're going to be polite. Right? No biting her in half or anything."

Toothless responded with a noncommittal shrug which failed to inspire confidence in both humans. He looked back at Artemisia and licked his lips.

"Don't worry, he loves teasing." Hiccup said, hoping her uneasy expression would fade a little.

It didn't.

Even so, Toothless eventually raised his head and pressed his snout into her palm. He drew back and licked his chops again, eyeing the fish hopefully. She brought it forward, and he darted out, snatching it from her palm and gobbling it up.

Toothless moved on to the rest of the bag, sniffing his way through its contents, and chewing noisily. Hiccup and Artemisia were standing on either side, petting his flanks. She took her time, running her hands along Toothless' wings, feeling the densely packed muscle, and the tough yet feather-light membrane which stretched from wingtip to flank. Her questing hands and inquisitive eyes explored his saddle, with its special foldable handles, and aerodynamic storage compartments.

Artemisia gave the Saddle a long, hard look, and then turned her gaze on Hiccup.

He nodded, grinning from ear to ear. "Yep. I ride him. And it's amazing."

"Explains how you've traveled so far." She took a moment to smile, sharing in his mirth. Then she moved on to the tail adjustment mechanism and followed it back down Toothless' flank, running her fingers along the jet-black clamshell scales, each one bearing a slightly different smoked pattern.

She followed the mechanism all the way to the end of Toothless' tail,

where she found the dark brown fin which Hiccup had fitted over the tattered bumpy scar; all which remained of Toothless' original fin. She examined the artificial fin, pulling on the connecting rod to make the tail open and close, watching the way each joint interacted, and how the supporting battens helped the false fin keep its shape.

"It's an artificial tailfin which I control. He can't fly without me." Hiccup explained. "And I can't fly without him."

"Are you sure?" she asked, deadpanned.

"Ha ha. You're a riot."

"It really is an amazing piece of technology!" She exclaimed. "You should be very proud!"

"I am."

"And what about him?" She asked enthusiastically. "How is he? How much can he understand?"

"A lot. Ummâ€œ| I think there's a lot he pretends not to understand."

"Like?"

"Oh, phrases. Things like: 'Toothless don't' or 'save some for me'."

Artemisia laughed and sat back on her heels, kneeling on the roof of the library. "If you had told me this morning that tonight I'd be staring at a live dragonâ€œ|"

"You'd try to put me away." Hiccup said. "Toothless isn't really used to visitors, and the ones he's had over the past few years are usually of the torch and pitchfork variety."

"Smarter to keep him hidden." She observed. "Is that how he lost his tailfin?"

Hiccup cringed, feeling familiar guilt stab at him. "I shot him down. It's how we met, actually. I know dragons aren't too common in the rest of the world, but back on Berk we—" he paused, stroking Toothless' scales absently. Sensing his rider's distress, the dragon turned away from his meal and curled around to gently nuzzle Hiccup's side. Hiccup said, "Back on Berk they were getting attacked once a month. Then I shot down Toothless and we became friends andâ€œ| and I couldn't stay."

Artemisia was studying him, taking careful note of his downcast expression, and the way he leaned into his scaly friend's embrace. She saw a very, very lonely soul.

She said, "Tell me everything."

"Well I wanted to take you out away from the city and find some clear spot where you could look at the night sky and take your measurements for your charts." The boy said hesitantly. "I thought Toothless could help with our experiments. You said you wanted me to help chart

planetary movements. Toothless can help!"

"I think he will." Artemisia agree, "And tomorrow night I will bring my equipment, and we'll chart the stars. But tonight we're just going to fly. And you're going to tell me everything, Hiccup Haddock. Who are you really? How is it that you're flying a dragon? And why are you doing it so far from home?"

* * *

><p>Aaaaand cue the heart to heart. I intend to skip his retelling of the story itself, as the relevant parts are of course Artemisia's thoughts on it, and the inevitable conversation with Hiccup. But I'm sure it will be a great relief to many of you to know that we are nearly done with Alexandria. I want to thank you for your patience with the first section of this chapter. I needed to cover the backstory of Alexandria's library. It is one of the most important parts of that city, and its fate will figure heavily in the remainder of the story. I know we're starved for action, and we're starved for Toothless. He will be appearing a great deal more in this story from this chapter onwards, and a HiccupToothless action scene is fast approaching. **

Anyway, your opinions, good or bad, are always valued, so let me know what you think!

15. Chapter 15

Prodigal Son 15

Astrid had always found reading a laborious activity. It was true that she had memorized the Book of Dragons, but that was out of necessity. The facts relayed in those pages were vital to the village's survival. Now she was forced to sit down again with a different book, telling her everything she knew was wrong.

And she would have to memorize it for her _own_ survival. She knew that if she made it out, the irony would amuse her. Luckily for her, Hiccup's handwriting was neat and crisp, a little smudged on occasion due to the fact the book had been soaked with seawater, but it was still more than legible.

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡nuÃ°ur, Harvest Month, eighteenth day.

My name is Hiccup Haddock. I am the first Viking ever to see a Night Fury. Or the first to have survived, at least.

Raid occurred just before midnight yesterday. Ran to forge to help Gobber. Used my net trap to catch a Night Fury. Saw it go down near Raven Point.

Tried to help. Screwed up. Dragons escaped with a quarter of our food stores. Told dad about the Night Fury. He doesn't believe me. I wouldn't either if I hadn't seen it myself. Am going to find it and prove it to dad! This fixes everything! I'm not a screw-up anymore! I am a Viking!

Note: Redesign Net trap sights. Also swivel mechanism at base needs to move more quickly. Caught Night Fury by fluke. A predictable success rate depends on aiming adjustment speed. More lubrication maybe?

See sketches Net Trap 42C-42G

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡;nuÃºur, Harvest Month, nineteenth day.

Found the Dragon. Was going to kill it with my dagger, but freed it instead! I know it'll probably be back to attack Berk and kill more of us again, but I just couldn't sink my knife in! I felt sorry for it. I can't kill even dragons when they're lying on the ground all tied up. I shot down a Night Fury and I have no proof. People still think my trap is a failure. People still think that I'm a failure. I freed it. I let it go, and now if that Night Fury kills any more of us, those deaths will be on my head.

Some Viking.

Got home. Dad put me in Dragon Training the day I discovered I can't kill dragons. Wonderful. I tried to tell him no, but he doesn't listen to me. He is leaving for Helheim's Gate. I hope he comes home okay, but what am I going to do?

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡;nuÃºur, Harvest Month, twentieth day.

First day in the kill ring. Nearly got blasted by an angry Gronkle. Off to a great start.

Shield is more important than sword

Noise throws off a Dragon's aim

All dragons have a limited number of shots

Gronkle only has six shots

A dragon will always go for the kill

Will a dragon always go for the kill? When I freed the Night Fury it did not kill me even though it had the chance. This is important. We've spent three hundred years killing them all on sight, and assuming they'd do the same to us. Yet the Night Fury didn't. Why not? Was Gobber wrong? I don't want to question him, but I have to. He's seen a lot more than me, but 'Always' is a very definitive word, and he sounded so sure when he said it. What else is Gobber wrong about?

Went back to Raven Point. Not sure why. Looking for answers.

The Dragon is still there! It's trapped in a cove. It can't fly away. It's missing half a tailfin. It looked â€|scared. And hungry.

_Read the book of dragons. Some information may be relevant i.e.

common nesting sites, classes and types, abilities, etc. But every entry ends with 'Kill on Sight'. That is not so useful. How old is this book? How much have we learned since? Why hasn't it been updated? Why are we still using it? Has anyone attempted to research Dragons since then? The entry on Night Furies contains no useful information. 'Hide and pray it does not find you.'? That is not useful._

Perhaps I can add to it. Perhaps I can learn from the dragon at Raven Point. I'll bring it some food tomorrow. It looked like it was hungry. Maybe it will let me get closer if I feed it first.

I'll just have to pray it doesn't eat me.

What in Hel's name am I doing?

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡;nuÃºur, Harvest Month, Twenty-first day.

During class today asked Gobber about Night Furies. He doesn't know anything about them. I love Gobber. He let me work at the Forge, and experiment with my designs. He's been so good to me over the years, but I'm starting to wonder how much he actually thinks about all of this. The war and everything. I nearly got killed by a Nadder today in the ring. At the very least I have to question his teaching methods.

But there's a bigger issue here: no one else is asking any questions! Astrid and Snotlout and Fishlegs and the Twins. No one has ever stopped to think about Dragons. The moment they get a weapon in their hands they just charge in.

Astrid said 'our parent's war is about to become ours' and 'figure out which side you're on'.

I am not a dragon. Which side I'm on should be obvious!

Is this how we see the world? In such black and white terms? It is easy to fear and hate them. After all, every time Gobber puts us in the Kill Ring with one of them, there is no doubt they try to kill us.

But what do we expect? We keep them underfed and locked in a dark room. Perhaps they're just scared. Perhaps they're just hungry.

It is true that the dragons during the raids attack and sometimes kill us. But we greet them with a hail of arrows, and do everything we can to kill them. Is this a war? Who started it? I've never gotten the impression the dragons were particularly organized. They could probably do a lot more damage to our village if they were. Are they trying to wipe us out? They could easily burn all of Berk to the ground but instead they fly off with our livestock. True, archers and warriors get killed, the occasional family gets burned up, but are the dragons actually trying to kill us, or just take our food? Starving us to death makes no sense, not when they can just burn all us instead.

_Thought experiment: Three fields, side by side. Field one has a herd of sheep, field two has sheep protected by warriors, and field three

has a farmhouse on it with women and children inside, protected by warriors._

Which field would the Dragons go for? Field one, field two, or field three?

If this is a war and they want to kill us all, they'd go for field three. It would cause the most damage to us. Burning that farm wipes out the Vikings. If, on the other hand, they just want the food, they'd go for field one.

We've seen this happen on Berk. Silent Sven's sheep are regularly stolen by Dragons, yet they leave his home with his family inside it intact. Would they perhaps attack his house if there were no sheep left in the field?

_Field two I think best represents what's actually going on. They want food, and they're willing to brave our warriors to get it. People are edible, right? It's a terrible thought but if they can't get a sheep, a small child would do just as well. _

I don't think it's a war. I think they're just trying to survive.

I also know now that my peers and Gobber and my father are not asking these questions. If I share my secret with them, they will not study the Night Fury. They will simply kill it because it is an enemy.

I went back to Raven Point. I brought a fish and a shield with me. Gobber said that shields were useful, and I will probably need it if things go badly.

I am reorganizing this journal. I am going to study this dragon. I'm going to learn what the truth is in the hope that we learn a more effective way to handle the raids. Once I collect enough evidence, I'm going to take it to my father. Lives will be saved on both sides, but we're smarter. It is up to us to adapt to them. If Dragons are just hungry, it means they are just animals. Animals can be discouraged and repelled. Animals can be trained. I resolve to train this dragon, and to learn from it. I'll try to present my findings in a way which is useful to anyone else who reads this journal.

Training the Dragon - Day 1

Got my shield stuck between two boulders. A fantastic start.

The Night Fury approached slowly, acting cautious. It stopped when it saw that I had my knife on me. I think this means it's smart enough to be capable of learning not just from its own experiences, but from what happens to other dragons as well. I had to throw my knife into a nearby pond before it would approach me again. It vomited up half the fish and dropped it in my lap to eat. It made sure I swallowed my mouthful, but did not seem to demand another bite. To me this indicates an act of trust as much as it does the mere sharing of food. I am taking this as a gesture of trust or friendship. I wonder, can all dragons regurgitate, or just the Night Furies?

Personal Note: my Night Fury has retractable teeth. I'm going to refer to him from now on as 'Toothless'.

Toothless is curious, and capable of imitating my behaviors. When I smiled at him, he tried to smile back, pulling his lips away from his gums.

I spent the rest of the day at the cove with him, hanging around and seeing how close I could get. Toothless grew more relaxed as the day wore on, even daring to fall asleep with me in sight. When I approached, he woke up and moved away, but at no time did he display any aggressive behavior.

Dragons can create, and they take pride in things. I drew Toothless' face in the dirt. He pulled up a small sapling and scribbled his own pattern. It had no organization to it, just a scribble. Yet he grew angry when I stepped on it. I don't think Toothless recognized himself in my drawing. I've discovered a limit to his intelligence.

Or maybe it was just a really bad picture.

When a dragon is hunched low to the ground, and its eyes are narrowed into slits, it is displaying hostile behavior. Approach cautiously because it does not trust you. Wider pupils means more trust.

How to Train your Dragon, Step 1: Assuming you have your dragon, work to Establish Trust. I brought the Night fury food, and made it clear I was not there to hurt it. Once trust was established, we could approach one another. Once we grew used to each other's presence, he let me touch him.

When I had stretched out my hand to him, I was utterly convinced I was about to lose my arm. I was offering no food, and Toothless could easily have mistaken it for a threat. My dad always said that getting hurt was an occupational hazard for a Viking, but that didn't mean I necessarily had to look forward to it. Not like the twins, at any rate. Even Astrid said 'It's only fun if you get a scar out of it.' Why are we supposed to celebrate this?

It may have been a dumb move, or a gamble but I had to do it! I need Toothless to trust me. I had to know for sure! I had to confirm it! Dragons can be gentle! They can be friendly. We can interact with each other without trying to kill one another. That is the truth. After 300 years of war, that is the truth.

_And no one in Berk will ever accept it. _

What am I doing? How am I going to convince anyone of anything? No one listens to me anyway.

Gobber said something terrible at dinner tonight. It was awkward and strange, sitting around that firepit, listening to Snotlout and the Twins as they shared stories about what they plan to do to any dragons they meet. Hearing Gobber tell the tales of how he lost his hand and his foot to the dragons.

_Every piece of information we're being given is teaching us to hate and fear dragons. These messages are good for warriors. I've never

been a fighter. Not like Dad, or Gobber, but I doubt hesitating is good for a Warrior during a battle. Not like I hesitated when the dagger was in my hand. Astrid never hesitates. I wonder what she would do if she knew my secret._

I can't tell anyone. It would only result in two things: Toothless' death, and my dad giving up on me for good. I would probably end up an exile.

At dinner tonight, Gobber said that a downed dragon is a dead dragon. He's right. The longer Toothless is stuck at Raven Point the greater the chances that someone will find him. A hunting party, maybe. Or Astrid. She always wanders through the woods when she's training. If anyone finds Toothless, he is as good as dead. What happened to him is my fault, and if he dies, that'll be my fault too.

I have to keep him alive, and I know how I'm going to do it.

Gobber lost his foot, and he wears a peg leg. Can I perhaps build Toothless a false tailfin to replace the one he lost?

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡nuÃºr, Harvest Month, Twenty-second day.

Training Toothless â€“ Day 2

Worked all night to build a false tailfin. Left early for Raven Point. I brought a basket of fish with me. I need Toothless distracted while I attach his prosthetic. I'm not sure how well he'll take the false tail, but I hope he understands I'm trying to help. There's only one way to find out.

I managed to get the prosthetic strapped to his tail. The first time he tried to take off, I was actually sitting on his tail. It was amazing! We were only in the air for a few seconds, but I realized we had a boatload of other problems: The prosthetic cannot stay open. It also can't open and close in sync with his real fin. It is also made of wood and leather. Neither of these materials last, and the prosthetic would need regular maintenance in order for him keep flying. This was supposed to be so simple: Give the dragon a new tailfin, and get him off the island before anyone finds him. This is not going to work. He needs me. He can't work the fin himself, and he can't maintain it himself.

I've come to realize that if I want him to fly, I need to be up in the air with him. What have I gotten myself into?

My next design will include a saddle. A place for me to sit while I work his fin. I'm frightened, but also excited. I wonder what Berk looks like from a Dragon's point of view. What does life feel like when you can soar above the clouds, flit from island to island in a matter of minutes instead of hours.

This could be the coolest thing I've ever done!

_Note: Night Furies hate Eels. I wonder if this is true of other

dragons. It's worth remembering at least. It might save my life in the ring._

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡;nuÃºur, Harvest Month, Twenty-third day.

Training Toothless â€“ Day 3

Spent the morning in the Kill Ring. I had the eel with me and I used it to chase a Hideous Zippleback back into its cage. Turned around to find the rest of the class staring at me. I've got to be more careful about how and when I use what I've learned. I don't want to get too good too quickly, or else they'll start asking questions.

I spent the rest of the day in the forge, building my saddle. I've attached a string to the Prosthetic so that I can pull it open when Toothless needs it.

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡;nuÃºur, Harvest Month, Twenty-fourth day.

Training Toothless â€“ Day 4

Toothless made me chase him all over the cove before he finally let me put the saddle on. He thought it was a game. It was annoying on the one hand, but on the other, I'm glad he thinks of me as someone he can play with. We're well past being afraid of eachother. He didn't like the saddle at first, but when I held up the prosthetic, he seemed excited. I think he understands what I'm trying to do. I think he wants to fly again. Of course he does! I would!

We tried something simple to start with: gliding across the cove. I pulled the string too hard and twisted his tail. It sent both of us crashing into the pond. I need more precise control!

Also, I need both hands to hold onto him. I'll try tying the rope to my foot.

Went back to the forge to redesign everything. See sketches 'Tailfin 3.1A-3.1R'

Added a safety harness. The last thing I want is to fall off of Toothless in mid-air. It just makes sense. Thank Odin Gobber hasn't walked in on me yet. I've been thinking of moving a few tools to Raven Point, so that I can make minor adjustments there instead of risking discovery at the forge. I've taken to explaining my redesigns to Toothless. I don't know why, but I feel like I should keep him informed. It's his prosthetic, after all. Anything else would be unfair somehow. I don't know how much he absorbs or understands, but it helps me think, and he looks far more interested in my work than anyone in Berk ever was.

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡;nuÃºur, Harvest Month, Twenty-fifth day.

Training Toothless â€“ Day 5

Morning at class. Read through the book of dragons. I could hardly pay attention. I spent all my time thinking about changes I could make to Toothless' prosthetic. It's getting easier to lie to everyone. No one expected me to pay attention anyway, but Astrid looked pissed off. At least she looked. It's more than was happening before.

I tried tying the tailfin adjustment line to my foot, and encountered the same problem. I'm starting to lose track of how many times Toothless and I have fallen, but I'm getting tired of it. I need to sit down and think of a way to make fine, predictable, and repeatable adjustments to Toothless' prosthetic. This will need a more complex system.

Looks like it's back to the drawing board.

Note: During one of our flights, Toothless and I crashed into a field full of long grass. He wouldn't stop rolling in it, and he wouldn't stop purring. I had to fetch cod from my bag in the cove in order to get him out of there. It's an interesting effect, though. I grabbed a handful just in case. I'm looking forward to testing it on other dragons in the Kill Ring.

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡;nuÃ°ur, Harvest Month, Twenty-sixth day.

Training Toothless â€“ Day 6

Gobber put us up against a Gronckle today. It charged at me, but I rubbed the long grass on its nose and it keeled right over. I managed to keep the grass hidden, but now everyone thinks I punched out a Gronckle. This is getting out of hand. They're starting to follow me around, asking questions! I hate all this attention. It's what I've wished for all my life, but now I just want to be left alone with Toothless. I want to redesign his saddle again! I want to fly!

Note: While playing with Toothless I discovered that he loves being scratched. Especially his neck and his back above his wings. Under his chin, there's a spot which puts him right to sleep if you scratch it just right. It certainly made putting on his new saddle a lot easier. I wonder if other dragons have the same weakness.

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡;nuÃ°ur, Harvest Month, Twenty-seventh day.

Training Toothless â€“ Day 7

Following morning in the ring, we were facing off against the Nadder. It went after me, but stopped as soon as I dropped my weapon. This proves that if we show we aren't a threat, they won't attack us.

_Astrid came charging in with her axe. I had to stop her from killing it so I tried scratching under its chin and it flopped to the ground exactly the same way Toothless did. I know I made a promise to be more subtle, but I had to do something! She was going to kill it! Or it was going to kill her. One of them was going to die unless I acted. But now everyone is following me now. It's getting harder and harder to slip away to Raven Point. The all piled around me at dinner. Asking questions and saying what a great dragon-killer I was going to be, how they always knew how great I was. Snotlout was saying that he never lost faith. I think he's forgotten all those times he kept dunking my head in the privy, and the twins have forgotten how hard they laughed. It's really annoying because I know they don't actually care. But suddenly they all want to be my friend.

-

Astrid is getting angrier by the day. I think she's starting to resent me. I don't blame her; she was at the head of the class, and now she's not. The trouble is that I don't want to be either. How do I keep this in the background? How do I keep Toothless safe? How can I be the new pride of Berk while I'm flying a dragon around? Sooner or later someone is going to hand me an axe and expect me to charge into battle with them.

What is dad going to think when he gets home?

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡;nuÃºur, Harvest Month, Twenty-eighth day.

Training Toothless â€“ Day 8

I did take a few tools back with me when I finally managed to slip away. I redesigned the saddle and added a guide system. Now the Adjustment line runs through a small pulley and along a wire guide. I was hammering away at the circular peddle adjustment guide when I noticed that Toothless was chasing something on the far side of the cove.

The sunlight was reflecting off my hammer, and shining a bright spot on the ground. Watching him trying to catch it was a lot of fun, and I only stopped when he was starting to get really frustrated. I don't know what he'd do if he was angry. He might roar loud enough to alert someone in a hunting party. Either way I used the trick in the Kill Ring when a Terrible Terror was chewing on Tuffnut's nose. Everyone thinks I just chased it back into its cage. No one in this village ever sees anything!

That's not quite true. Astrid caught me lugging my eighth redesign (Sketches Tailfin 8.4A-8.4E) back to Raven Point. It was bound to happen sooner or later. We both head to the woods after classes. She likes throwing her axes at trees and Iâ€™m like training dragons, apparently. Why can't my life ever be simple? It took me a little while to lose her, but I think she's getting really suspicious. I'll have to be more careful.

_I think design 8.4 is it. It's the one. I have fine-tuned, predictable control over the movement of the prosthetic tailfin. Its guide isolates the movement, preventing my adjustment of the prosthetic from interfering with the greater movements Toothless'

tail need to make. I'm no longer going to be yanking it to the side and throwing us off-balance. —

No more crashing into that pond, thank the gods!

I rode Toothless around the cove for a little while. He got used to carrying my extra weight very quickly, and was especially pleased when I rewarded him with an extra fish or two. We managed to take off and land outside the cove. I was only in flight for a few seconds, but it was quite a rush when we managed to land safely in the forest a few meters from the edge.

Toothless seemed really happy to be out of there. I'm going to feel all guilty when I leave him there again at the end of the day. I can't wait to start flying in earnest, but I know we need more practice. Toothless and I have grown very close, but we need to be able to read each other. I need to understand what his movements mean. I cannot see how far he has extended his real tailfin. I need to be able to read his needs and adjust the prosthetic accordingly. He also needs to learn how to work with me. We're a team now, and we need to practice together.

I set up an anchor on the edge of a windy clifftop. It straps onto Toothless' saddle. I'm hoping this will allow us to simulate flying conditions without putting either of us in real danger. I've started to take notes on the various positions the prosthetics can take, and what each of them mean. There's position one, which is full flight, position 2 I think is and easy glide, position three made Toothless try and bat his wings forward. He nearly pulled the anchor out, so I'm pretty sure it's the signal to speed up. Position five closed the tail, and we dropped to the ground. Position six makes him spread his wings wide against the wind. That's how we're going to slow down.

_I think Toothless is able to intuitively read the way the wind moves around us, the strain on his tailfins or something. He knows what I want him to do, and we can communicate through the fin positions. I still have to find a way to turn from side to side, but it's an enormous breakthrough. It also means I ultimately have control over what we do. I'm not sure how I feel about that. Toothless is his own man. __Dragon. Whatever. I meant this to free him, not make him even more reliant on me, but at the same time, I can't help feeling relieved. I really enjoyed the time we've spent together over the course of this project. He's taught me so muchâ€¦_

I would have thought he would have a much harder time with all of this. He lost his fin, afterall. I can't imagine what it would be like for me to lose my foot. But he seems happy to be around me, even if it means having all this annoying gear strapped to him. I wonder if he felt as lonely as I did before we met.

Either way I want to help him and thank him. Do something to make this more comfortable for him. I'm going to line the underside of the leather saddle with lamb fur, to prevent it from chafing and make it more comfortable for him. I think he'll appreciate it.

_Had another close-shave with Astrid: We were practicing when gust of wind sent us flying back into the forest. It was my fault. I screwed up and used position six instead of position two. Not important. The problem was that the latch for my safety harness got bent out of

shape, and none of the tools at Raven Point could get it unstuck. I was stuck to Toothless. I had to wait until nightfall and then sneak back into the village with him to get the proper tools. Astrid caught me outside the forge. I only just got away. Man, she's going to be so angry that I just bailed on her._

It was all too close. Far too close! This is getting beyond dangerous, but I'm too far in to stop. There is no way I'm going to leave my friend out there in the cove, and I'm not going to turn him in, either. Everyone on Berk is a thug, and they'd just kill him on sight. I simply can't let that happen.

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡nuÃºr, Harvest Month, Twenty-ninth day.

Training Toothless â€“ Day 9

Flight day.

I skipped dragon training entirely today. I don't want it. I don't need it. It's pointless, and it's only going to get me into more trouble. It's only going to cut down on my time with Toothless. This entire village hated me just two weeks ago. How can anyone's opinions change that quickly? Some of them might be genuine but somehow I just can't get used to having all of this attention. I don't trust it. I don't trust them either. I can't afford to.

I left just before dawn broke, and ran as fast as I could to Toothless' cove. It took me a little longer than usual because I was lugging two bags of fish for Toothless. I think he's going to be hungry after the flight. My stomach is full of butterflies, but I need to do this! I have to. We've practiced and we're ready, and I have my cheat sheet with me, just in case. I have my safety harness as well. I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be!

I rode Toothless up the side of the mountain. Normally a hike like that would take a hunting party half a day. It took us all of half an hour. We practiced gliding for a little while, turning gently from side to side high above the sea stacks off of raven point. Berk looks so small form up there! All the people, all my fellow villagers, they all look so tiny. Just little dark dots moving from house to house even the doors of the great hall, which are so very tall, are barely the size of my fingernail from up there. If only they could see what I saw! If only they could feel what I felt! It was terrifying and exhilarating, but I've never felt so alive!

And we dived. I feltâ€¦ I felt like the gods had switched off everything. I felt like I was floating, weightless like a cloud and zooming down towards the waves. Toothless and I were still perfecting our system, but I learned I can control us through leaning. When I want to bring us closer to the earth, I lean forward. When we want to rise, I lean back. Left to go left, right to go right. It is as simple and intuitive on this page as it is in the air.

_The difference is actually keeping one's head. Overcoming all the fear and worry and learning how to read and respond to Toothless as he reads and responds to me. You have to be utterly fearless to fly, but the reward is worth it! The experience is worth it! I want to be

up there with him forever! Why didn't the god's give us wings? Doesn't matter. One day I'll make my own. I'll find a way! One day it'll be me and my buddy up there, soaring through the clouds, side by side! I'm so proud of Toothless! And I'm so proud of me! If only I could share this with everyone!_

I nearly died on that flight. Toothless and I were rising. It is incredible, to have his massive wings beating on either side, pulling us further and further towards Asgard. I lost my cheat sheet, and grabbed for it but my safety harness slipped loose. Toothless and I both started to fall but I managed to get back into the saddle and slow us down. I've never gone so fast in my life, even as we were trying to slow down, the air trail behind us was knocking snow off the treetops. We survived it, and managed to fly through the seastacks and out towards the open sea.

I spent all day flying with him. We landed on a deserted island north of Berk, and had lunch. I cooked a fish or two for myself while Toothless ate the rest. A few Terrible Terrors came by, looking for something to eat. I gave one my fish and he cuddled up beside us. They're adorable little guys! They all are. If we could find it in ourselves to stop killing them, we could learn so much! We could do so much! Everything we think know about them is wrong!

This is terrible! I feel like everything is backwards! The entire village loves me, now that I'm competent in the ring. But it's all a lie. Instead of being a respected warrior, I've discovered that I can't kill dragons at all. The thought sickens me. I'm haunted by fears of what would happen if they ever found Toothless. I finally have Viking friends, but they're only there because they all want to learn my secret. My only true friend is supposed to be my mortal enemy, and Astridâ€|_

Astrid still hates me. I had imagined that at least would change. I hadn't planned for this rivalry, I just wanted her to notice I existed!

What will happen when my father gets back? What will happen when I become champion, and they'll expect me to kill the Nightmare? I will become champion. No one else stands a chance. Not even Astrid. She can train as hard as she likes but in the end I know how to handle the dragons. I must stay one step ahead of the others, Astrid included because if I don't, they're going to kill the dragons in the ring. I've managed to avoid any deaths so far. I used Dragon Nip on the Gronckle, and dealt with the Nadder. Thank Thor that Toothless and the Nadder are so similar.

But I know that it is all false. Just putting off the inevitable. The champion has to kill the Monstrous Nightmare. I will see a dragon die, or I will lose everything. I know that if my father comes back, he will not rest until he sees me slay a Monstrous Nightmare. I keep looking to Toothless, hoping he has an answer. He's become such a good friend. Someone I can finally trust and tell my troubles to. And I know he understands far more than he lets on.

Maybe Astrid was right. Maybe I am on the wrong side of this war, but I can't imagine hurting any of the other villagers either. There has to be a way out of this!

_Dad got home today. I literally just finished writing the above

entry when he came into the forge to find me. It was the happiest I've ever seen him. I was panicking. I thought for a moment he'd found out about Toothless somehow, but he hadn't. Everyone had just told him what they thought was going on in the ring. Everyone told him how great a dragon killer I was. None of them have noticed that I haven't killed any dragons!_

He said he couldn't wait to see me spill a Nadder's guts, or mount my first Gronckle head on a spear, but the thoughts sicken me. All of these dragons are just animals, not enemies! It's not their fault! They don't deserve all of this hatred!

_He said more, though. He said that for years I was the worst Viking Berk had ever seen. That hurt. A lot. I had always known that's what he thought, but I didn't expect him to just come out and say it like that. It really really hurt, but it made me see things so very clearly. _

I knw what defines a good Viking, and I know that I want no part of that. For the first time I can remember, my father is proud of me, and for the first time ever, that's not my priority anymore.

I was so scared he knew. The pictures of Toothless' new saddle designs were right there on the table. Everything he needed to see to understand what I was really doing were all right there, laid out in plain sight, yet he never saw it. Like everyone on this island he is blind to the truth. Somehow to him, his legacy, and his family's reputation are more important.

Everything's gone so wrong.

He gave me my own helmet and said it was made from my mum's breastplate. Cue the awkward silenceâ€|

I don't know what to do. I'm lying in bed now. I have been for hours. I can hear him snoring below me. Tomorrow is the last round of Dragon training. I will be declared Champion. Dad will want to watch me kill the Nightmare. What do I do? I don't know what to do. Do I tell him about Toothless? Do I try to explain everything?

No. Stoick the Vast would never let a dragon live. He would kill Toothless, and I'd be a bigger shame than ever.

Toothless trusts me. Over the past ten days he's been a better friend than anyone on Berk has for the past fourteen years. Even Gobber. I can't betray him. I won't.

Toothless trusts me.

* * *

><p>HaustmÃ¡;nuÃ°ur, Harvest Month, Thirtieth day.

Training Toothless â€“ Day 10

_This will be my last entry. I am leaving Berk. I beat the Gronckle, and the Goethi chose me over Astrid to be Berk's Champion. I was carried out of the arena on Fishlegs' shoulders, with the crowd cheering. I am not a Viking. I can never be a Viking. Not while they think the way they think and act the way they do. I cannot undo three

hundred years of traditions and customs. I cannot change the village's mind. I certainly cannot change my father's, and he runs Berk._

I have to leave. I have to leave to protect myself, and to protect Toothless. Midgard is a big place, or so trader Johann says. There are lands to the south, to the east, and to the west. I will find a place where Toothless and I can be accepted. I will find a place full of reasonable people. I will find a place far apart from all of this violence. I owe it to my friend, and I owe it to myself. Together Toothless and I can solve any problem, overcome any obstacle. He needs me more than Berk does. And I need him more than I need Berk.

I'm going to hide this journal. I'm leaving everything behind save for a basket of fish and a few other supplies. Perhaps this account will get burned in the next raid. I know that my father won't be the one to find it. I don't say this out of bitterness or anger, but out of simple fact. He never looks at anything twice.

If it is not found, then it does not matter, and if it is found, I know that by then I will be long gone. To simply vanish would be best. They'll assume I was eaten by a wild dragon. There's no way I can say goodbye without tipping someone off. Maybe the reputation my dad is so fond of will remain intact. That's the least I can do. After all, for fourteen years he put up with the worst Viking Berk had ever seen.

* * *

><p>I'm going to split this chapter up into two parts. The next chapter will be Astrid-centric as well. I posted a paragraph at the start to give this chapter more context.

I have to admit, I'm a little nervous about posting this journal. I'm not convinced I managed to capture Hiccup's voice. Please let me know your thoughts on his characterization here. If there's anything you think I should tweak or change to better capture Hiccup, please don't hesitate to let me know.

16. Chapter 16

Prodigal Son 16

Ten days?

Ten days with a lamed dragon was all it had taken for Hiccup Haddock to abandon his people?

A myriad of emotions welled up inside of Astrid as she sat there on her gods-forsaken beach, running her palms across the wrinkled cover of Hiccup's thin journal, but resentment and betrayal were foremost in her thoughts. What kind of a coward would give up on his village, his family, and his responsibilities? Hiccup was the son of a chief, after all. It was not just his own future he was supposed to think about, but the future of the clan as a whole. Hiccup Haddock was supposed to inherit the Chiefdom from his Father.

Not that anyone on Berk had been looking forward to that. How could a

man lead when he could not even swing a sword? Hiccup obviously knew how the village saw him.

And it was there that Astrid's her feelings weren't entirely one-sided. Her anger was tempered by a measure of sympathy. Ten days with a lamed dragon had not given him cause to leave. It was ten days with a dragon, and fourteen years' living in Berk, where the only thing which counted was one's ability to fight and kill. An ability which he lacked.

Astrid well remembered Snotlout's wanton cruelty. No one had ever lifted a finger to prevent the children from bullying Hiccup. Hiccup was a Viking, after all. A true Viking should have been able to fight the bullies off, or failing that, be strong enough to put up with it. It was exactly that mindset which she knew Hiccup had rebelled against when he'd taken flight.

But it all still rubbed her the wrong way. To Astrid, who had declared herself a shield maiden, forgone marriage and family out of devotion to the village as a whole, was to her very core insulted by the ease with which Hiccup had simply left his clan. Had they, in the end, mattered so little to him?

Had he mattered so little to them? He was right, in his last comment. The book she held in her hands contained the secret to ending Berk's three-hundred year war. It had sat amongst his possessions in his father's house for eight years, and Stoick had never found it. Hiccup had been missed for all of a month. Then Viking life simply went back to normal. Those who cared- Stoick and Gobber- had their argument, and the chief grew more dour and quick-tempered. Yet the rest of the village had simply forgotten him.

Hiccup Haddock had been dubbed Berk's Lost Heir. He had been eaten by a dragon in what was a very minor tragedy, and life had moved on. A few of his more useful designs had come to fruition through Gobber's dedicated work, but for eight years, Berk had remained absolutely oblivious to his biggest accomplishment, and the earth-shaking revelation which accompanied it. That was Stoick's fault for not giving his child's possessions a thorough look (not that Astrid could blame him too much), and mostly it was Berk's fault for treating him as such a pariah that he accurately predicted they would never listen to him anyway. It was true Hiccup had been responsible for a fair amount of destruction and mayhem, but so had the twins. No, it was his inability to swing a flail or lift a sword or draw a bow which had devalued him to the point he felt leaving was a better option.

What if things had been different? What if he had tried to tell them? She remembered certain moments which the journal mentioned. The incident with the Zippelback had actually entered into Berk lore. Children were told the tale of Berk's lost heir, who had flourished too late and died too soon. She smirked- if only they knew what had actually happened.

Then there was the night she had caught them at the forge as well. Hiccup had been pulled through a window, only to vanish into thin air. He had escaped on his dragon, of course. But it sent chills down her spine when she realized that for a few moments of her life only a thin wooden partition and a weedy little lad had stood between her, and a Night Fury. The fastest and deadliest of all dragons. If

she'd known, and had her axe with her...

No, Hiccup was right in that his thrice-damned dragon would have died had he chosen to reveal it to any of them, her included. She recalled him easily, just a thin wisp of a lad, scrawny and spotty. Always ready with a sarcastic remark. He couldn't fight, and every time he stepped out his door, disaster inevitably struck. She had not been heartbroken about his departure. This journal had not changed her opinion much. And despite her sympathy for his impossible situation, there were Vikings, and there were dragons. There were sides in this war. Astrid had just added Traitor to the list of titles for Hiccup.

She sat there a long while, contemplating. She grew quite hungry, but ignored the rumbling in her belly. She would need that food for later. She would need it for the Nadder. Oh, yes. The solution to her situation lay within the text of Hiccup's memoir. His confession. His betrayal. She would take what lessons she needed, but she was stronger than him. Hiccup may have fallen into his delusions about the beasts, but she would not. Animals they might be, but they still raided. They still stole livestock and murdered Berkians. In her mind's eye, Astrid watched that young child totter out the door of the burning Hrolfson home. No, she would not break. She was a shield maiden of Berk. A warrior, cold and ruthless as a warrior had to be. She would use the tools at her disposal to get off the island. That was all.

* * *

><p>On her way to the Nadder she passed by the water trap she had set up the previous day. The sun had nearly reached its apex, and her hunger was only secondary to her thirst. The oiled leather bag was nearly full, and she drank in great gulps, cupping the cool water with both hands. It was clean and clear, and very refreshing. It had been heavily filtered as it passed from the ocean through the enormous sand dune which formed her island.</p>

By the time she felt sated, the bag was a third empty. She hoisted it carefully and slung it over her shoulder. It kept the water quite well, though in the two hours it took her to wind her way across the beaches small droplets were beginning to seep through the seams, and the leather was stained dark with moisture.

She found the Nadder in much the same state as it had been before. It was still lying prone on the beach, wrapped in the rigging and cloth she so desperately needed. She could see how mightily it had struggled by the deep impressions. Left in the soft sand. The dragon spotted her immediately and let out an alarmed squawk, kicking weakly against the sand. Its eyes were wide and sharp as she moved slowly towards it, arms stretched out in what she hoped was a consoling manner.

Step One, Hiccup had written, Establish Trust.

Well, Astrid had no weapons to drop, aside from her carefully hidden knife, and she wasn't giving that up. But she had food and water, and it was likely the dragon had neither. If Hiccup was right about it being just an animal, then it needed to eat and drink. It was hungry and thirsty and that was something she could use against it.

When she was three meters away, she stopped. The dragon cawed and crowed and raised its frill in warning. Its coloring was a light blue with shades of green. Beautiful, in a deadly and horrid way. Its half-beak, half-jaw was an alien, grotesque combination, yet elegant in its own way. She was terribly aware that if it decided to flame at this distance, there wasn't much she could do.

"Alright, dragon." She said. At the sound of her voice, its head cocked to one side. It squawked twice in answer, and opened its frill, the spines spreading widely apart. Astrid said, "I don't like you, and you don't like me, but here we are. I need those ropes, and you want to be free. I help you and you help me. A truce, alright?"

It chirped and tilted its head from side to side, pupils widening as it examined her with both eyes. She took a few steps forward, and its mouth snapped open, revealing a dark maw, and a row of sharp teeth. Astrid tensed, ready to dodge the flame she knew was coming. Her movement made the water in her satchel slosh and drip onto the dry sand. The Nadder froze, its eyes fixated on the wet droplets.

Its mouth slowly closed and it cocked its head to one side pleadingly.

"Thirsty, huh?" Astrid asked triumphantly. "You kill me, you're getting none of this, you hear me beast?"

It squawked indignantly, but allowed her to approach. Steeling her nerves, Astrid knelt just a meter from the Nadder's head. She opened the satchel and cupped a handful of water, bringing it to her lips. The Nadder watched her every move as she drank a small amount. She stuck her hand into the clean liquid and pulled it out, allowing the droplets to fall from her fingertips to the sand between her and the Nadder. The beast's forked red tongue flicked out, catching a few droplets.

"Want a drink?" Astrid offered. She dug a small holed in the sand, always keeping one eye trained on the beast, lest it make any sudden moves. Yet it seemed more interested in earning itself a sip from her satchel. "Then you leave me be. Alright?"

She laid her bag in the hole, half buried so that the hole helped the soft leather keep its shape. She opened the satchel, and allowed the beast to drink, which it did. Its tongue flicked out greedily, taking in sip after sip of the precious liquid. She watched it for a few seconds. Its movements were fast and sloppy; desperate. But it seemed to be occupied.

Astrid rose to her feet and circled the enormous beast, surveyed its situation. The spear was still embedded in its thigh. Blood had run down its leg and dried, leaving a dark patch around which a few flies buzzed. Removing the weapon would be the first problem, as she couldn't predict how the creature would react. Would it think she was trying to hurt it? Not that she cared if she hurt it or not, but there was a strong chance it would strike at her.

The slurping continued at her side as the downed dragon took a long drink. The ropes were tangled around its legs, and its wings were wrapped under a large sail. Astrid moved towards the spear first. The

moment she wrapped her hand around it, the Nadder squawked loudly. Astrid gave it a glance, and discovered that it had fixed her with a steady look, its eyes wide.

"I'm going to pull it out." Astrid said. "Calm down. I want to help."

There was a quiet click noise, and its tail rose into the air, spines extended and ready to fire. Astrid had nowhere to dodge, and at this range, it wouldn't miss. She let go of the spear and took a step back, holding her hands up. "Look, I know you don't trust us!" she caught sight of a hole in its wing, made by a well-aimed arrow. That, along with its colouring; blue and green, clicked into place, and she remembered just a few days ago, hanging from a sea stack, with her bow pointed up at the sky. She said, "And you and I have met before, haven't we?"

The Nadder's yellow eyes narrowed as it glared at her.

"You killed Snorri Sigurdson."

It chirped again Astrid doubted it was smart enough for the noise to be an admission of any kind. The beast just sounded curious.

She sighed. "Look, it doesn't matter right now. Tell you what—" She dug around in the folds of her clothing and pulled out the second and last wrapped salted fish. The Nadder's nostrils widened instantly and it made a cooing noise. Its eyes were fixed on the modest meal.

With one hand, Astrid moved the fish back and forth. The Nadder's eyes followed it, as if hypnotized. A small amount of drool leaked out the side of its mouth and onto the beach. With her other hand, Astrid grabbed the spear again, and once again, its tail rose in response, spines at the ready. She stuffed the food away into her clothes. "You're not getting any fish while that tail's up."

The spines flicked down, smooth against the tail, and Astrid pulled the fish back out. The tail flopped to the sand. She took a deep breath, and yanked upwards on the spear. The dragon reacted immediately. Its yellow eyes narrowed, and its mouth opened, letting out a cone of hot fire. At the same time spines flew in every direction, forcing Astrid to dive out of the way. She felt one rip through the loose fabric under her armpit, tearing a large hole, but none of them hit her.

Astrid scampered away as fast as she could, and dove over the side of a small sand dune, ignoring the Nadder's rage-filled cries. A few spines flew after her, but they went over the dune and out to sea, skipping across the water until they sank beneath the waves.

Two hours went by in silence. Astrid wanted to make sure that its initial rage had passed before she approached again. She sincerely regretted leaving her water behind, as thirst and hunger both began to eat away at her in earnest.

At last she crawled up and peered over the side of the dune. The Nadder was sipping at the water again, but it stopped, spotting her immediately. She began to make her way towards it, moving slowly and keeping low. The beast's tail had risen, cocked like a scorpion's and ready to fire more spines at her. It followed her every move, as did

the dragon's beady eyes. When she was within ten meters, it blew a small fireball at her, which fell short, and Astrid recognized it as a warning shot. It would not let her get closer, but that was okay. She had a plan.

"Wait!" she ordered, lifting the spear up with one hand. She let the weapon drop to the sand. The Nadder made a curious noise, and the tail lowered a small amount. Astrid took a step closer, then another.

Another gout of fire caused her to skip backwards and halt. The dragon was fixing her with a thoroughly distrustful look.

"Alrightâ€|" Astrid said, "Fine." She dug around in her boot and pulled out her smaller knife, tossing it to the side. "Now are you happy, you demon?"

It squawked again, a nervous noise, but lacking the edge it had before. Its tail was still following every move she made. Astrid moved slowly and carefully, keeping both hands in sight. She knelt beside the water and cupped her hands, taking a few sips. To her amazement, so did the dragon, its long tongue snaking out to lap at the satchel.

Astrid waited there a little while, letting it calm down. After a time its tail lowered once again, as did the hairs on the back of her neck. She felt it was time. She pulled out the fish and unwrapped it, holding it out for the Nadder to take. "Here you go." She said, trying to keep the nervousness out of her voice.

The dragon leaned forward, watching Astrid carefully. When she made no moves to harm it, the Nadder's tongue flicked out and snatched up the slice of fish, rolling backwards into its mouth. It chirped cheerfully, and seemed to relax after that, though it sniffed at her clothing.

"I don't have any more. And keep away from me!" She backed up a meter. The dragon crooned after her and settled back against the sand. Astrid circled once again to its side, taking hold of the ropes. Once again, the Nadder's tail rose and it squawked harshly at her, eyes narrowed as it warned her to back away from its flank.

"Oh, kill me then, if you're going to do it, but you'll never get free!" Astrid barked back, losing patience, "Hiccup may have wanted to get all friendly but I couldn't care less. I already dropped my weapons. If I can't get this rigging off you then I'm dead anyway, so take your best shot!"

They glared at each other, woman and dragon. It tilted its head to the side, perturbed. Astrid resumed her work, untangling the knotted rigging which had caught the creature's legs. She worked quickly, desperately wanting to get this over with and put as much distance between herself and the Nadder as possible. It struggled a little, but things became easier once she got one of its legs free. Coils of rope dropped to the sand. The Nadder froze. Then it carefully stretched its leg out to its full length. Astrid who had been tugging on a line which ran underneath the beast, backed away. The claws on the creature's feet could easily disembowel her, and she did not want

to take the risk.

The Nadder gave her a thorough examination, then rolled onto its back, exposing the line she had been tugging at, and making her task of freeing it much easier. It was cooperating, she realized. Astrid hesitated a few more seconds, then came forward once again and continued to unwind the creature until all at once it sprang free, stretching its wings to full length, chittering and squawking in jubilation as the sail came away and floated gently to the beach. It stood there for a moment, stomping its feet and beating its wings, stretching out the kinks which had built up during its imprisonment. Then it turned towards Astrid, rearing its wings and aggressively spreading its frill. Its beak snapped open and it let out a long, raucous wail, dancing from one foot to the other and flapping its wings.

Astrid tensed and dove for the fallen spear, but the Nadder reached her first, knocking her backwards and pinning her to the beach with its taloned foot. She grabbed at the black claws, trying to dislodge them. All the while its open mouth was descending towards her head. Astrid roared in defiance, staring up at the toothed maw. "Just do it, then! Just do it, Demon!" She struck out with her fist, hitting the side of its head. It was a weak blow; she had no leverage.

This had been a bad idea from the start. She should have stabbed it with the spear and taken the chance. She didn't want to die like this, impaled on those ferocious fangs. As the dragon's mouth blocked out the last of the sunlight she made up her mind then and there to rise again as a draugr, find Hiccup Haddock, and skin him.

Then there was darkness, but no pain. A wet, slimy tongue slid across her face and for a moment Astrid feared she might drown in foul-smelling dragon-spit. A gagging noise echoed loudly in the damp, dark, foul space. Then the light reappeared, and there was a great rush of wind and sand. Astrid shut her eyes and covered her head. She curled up to shield herself as she heard the Nadder's joyful calls, growing faint as it shot skyward.

Astrid lay back in the sand, spread-eagled. She coughed and spat out gobs of dragon spit. Her entire upper body was soaked in it. It was in her hair, and spread between her fingers in long, slimy strands.

Far above her head, circling the island and squawking joyfully, she could see the distant silhouette of the Nadder, contrasted against the sky. Lying on her chest was a half-eaten filet of salted fish.

* * *

><p>The rest of the day was spent in labour. Astrid's first action was to retrieve the spear, and her knife. She planted the spear in the ground, easily accessible, and tucked the knife in her belt, then set about organizing her materials.</p>

There was certainly enough rope, and she laid it out across the beach in three long lines to bind logs together, saving a fourth coil for binding the mast and sail.

There wasn't much wood on the island, only the smaller shards of shattered logs, and enormous bleached driftwood tree trunks which

were difficult to lift. The ancient wooden logs were nearly as wide as her shoulders. They had washed high up on the shoreline long ago, likely blown above the high-tide line by some ancient storm. Lying against the sand dunes, they formed a long natural barrier which separated the sandy beach from the stiff dry grasses and larger dunes which covered that part of the island. Astrid strode up to the nearest one. She sat down on the opposite side of it, pressing her back against the log and her feet against the dune. With a considerable amount of huffing and puffing, she managed to push it off its sandy perch, and the log tumbled a few feet down the beach towards her three ropes. Astrid leapt to her feet vigorously and sprang after it. She grabbed an end and managed to lift it a few inches above the sand, setting it down half a meter further towards the ropes than it had been before. She repeated this process with the other side, and began wiggling the log down the beach, back and forth, end by end, inch by inch

She heard a familiar squawking. The Nadder had landed at the top of the nearest sand dune, and was watching her with a certain amount of interest.

"Get out of here!" Astrid yelled hoarsely. Its head tilted to the side and it crowed at her. "Go on. Get out of here! You're free! Get the hell away from me!"

The Nadder ignored her. With barely a flap of its wings, it launched itself off the dune and onto the beach, halving the distance between them. Astrid darted for the spear, fully expecting to feel the sharp bite of Nadder spines in her back at any minute. Yet when she reached the weapon and turned, she found the Nadder facing in completely the opposite direction. It was giving the beginning stages of her raft a close examination.

She charged forward, yelling at the top of her lungs and waving her spear around. The beast shrieked in alarm and took off, giving her a sour look as it headed skywards.

After an hour of huffing and puffing, it occurred to her that she would be better off bringing the ropes to the logs, and so she shifted her construction methods, inching each enormous log towards the others, laying them out in an even, strict row in preparation for binding. The process took a long time, nearly an hour a log, and Astrid found the slow progress disheartening.

She saw the Nadder quite often over the course of the afternoon, driving it away from her raft several times. It left for an hour, only to return and bombard her with raw fish, after which point it planted itself down upon one of the three logs she had managed to move,

"Leave me alone!" Astrid snapped once again. "I'm not Hiccup. We are not friends. I saved your life, and you didn't kill me. That is the beginning and the end of our association. Go! Away!" She once again waved her spear at the Nadder, who promptly blasted most of it away with a fireball. The Viking woman lowered what remained of her only weapon, and stared at its charred, smoking end. She exchanged a glance with the Nadder, who was looking slightly put out (a dragon could do that?). Astrid growled in frustration and tossed the charred stick over the nearest dune and out of sight.

To her amazement, the Nadder vanished after it like a shot. She felt momentary relief, but a few seconds later the dragon returned, only to drop the stick at Astrid's feet. It preened smugly.

Astrid stared dumbly at the stick. She looked back up at the Nadder and sighed. "Fine. Go sit over there!" She thrust her finger out towards the dune. "Over there. Don't bother me. Go sit over there! SIT!" the Nadder squawked at her indignantly and marched past her, knocking her into the sand with its tail as it passed by. It planted itself down upon the dune and stayed surprisingly still for a while, though it eventually grew bored watching her, and poked around in the tall grass, chasing some small creature Astrid didn't care about.

By sundown, she had made considerable progress towards a floatable raft, she knew she was a long way off. She had only managed to move four logs, and on the archipelago's rough seas, she knew that was not enough. Her shoulders and her back ached in protest. She was hungry, thirsty and tired beyond her wits. Her stiff, threadbare clothes were stained with sweat, and her skin was chafed and raw. What little fresh water she had left in Fishlegs' satchel had evaporated, and she began the long trek back to her pitiful water source to rebuild her moisture trap.

Halfway there, the Nadder came back, keeping pace behind her like a faithful dog. She stumbled and fell, her exhaustion and dehydration working against her. To her tired amazement, the dragon caught her, gripping her collar in its beak and holding her up. Astrid hadn't realized how spent she really felt until she was leaning against the Nadder's snout for support. She straightened quickly.

"Look, you want to help?" she said through cracked lips. "I need water. Wa-Ter. Drinkingâ€¢!" Astrid waved the satchel vaguely in the air. The Nadder's eyes widened as it recognized the bag. A moment later it snatched the satchel from her weakened fingers and took off into the air with hardly a sound. Astrid stood there on the sand, swaying with exhaustion and watching the dragon fly away with her only hope.

Too spent to yell, Astrid simply turned around and trudged slowly back towards the raft. Her legs finally gave out a dozen meters from her project. Her knees hit the cold sand, and the rest of her body followed a moment later. She lay there, feeling exhaustion sweep over her as she stared at the stars blossoming in the sky. "Stupid overgrown pigeon." She murmured, and was asleep moments later.

* * *

><p>She woke once during the night to hear faint squawking, and heavy footfalls lumbering around somewhere beside her. The noises hardly registered with her, and no sooner had she awoken, then she was back in sleep's clutches bring dragged into the blissful darkness.</p>

Sunlight shone through her eyelids, and she could hear the cry of seagulls and the ocean waves beating against the shoreline. Her head was pounding, a byproduct of the dehydration. She opened her eyes, groaning. The seagulls continued to flap around. Every noise the hellspawn birds made was a nail in her skull.

Astrid sat up, bracing herself with her arms. Seagulls had flocked to

the beach to eat the fish which the Nadder had dropped on her the previous day. She still couldn't figure out why it had done such a strange thing. White bird droppings were everywhere and the entire place stank.

One of the white birds was looking at her, with its head cocked to the side. She threw a handful of sand at it, and it took off, only to land a short distance away, still giving her that beady, stupid stare.

Astrid forced herself to her feet, cringing at the ache in her back and her shoulders. She took a few steps towards her raft and froze.

The four great logs she had managed to place were still there, as were the ropes. However during the night, more logs had been dragged in line with them. Indeed, Astrid realized that every large log on that stretch of beach was now lying perpendicular to the water, and that they were all lined up in a straight, even row. They stretched as far along the beach as Astrid could see. The entire beach was covered in Nadder footprints.

She heard a loud squawking noise from the crest of the dunes. The Nadder was standing there, looking quite pleased with itself.

"Youâ€|?" Astrid gestured dumbly at the beach, with its strict rows of bleached driftwood. The colours were such a strange, stark contrast made worse with her headache; bone-white wood, yellow sand and blue sky. Such a simple world.

The Nadder hopped from its sand dune and landed beside her, chirping happily and tilting its head from side to side. It trotted a short distance away and drew Astrid's attention to the satchel, placed back in the hole she had originally dug for it. It was full of fresh, clean water.

She started running, and fell to her knees beside the water. It felt so soothing against her parched mouth that she let out a quiet moan. She took long deep gulps, cupping both hands once again to bring as much of the water as she could to her lips. When she finally felt sated, she took a handful and flung it against her face, relishing its coolness, and the clean feeling which came with it.

The Nadder was standing in front of her, chirping quietly and tilting its head from side to side. Astrid stared up at it as she kneeling over the water.

"Thanksâ€|" she said quietly.

It squawked an acknowledgment, but didn't move. She suppressed her fear and lifted her hand to lay it carefully on the dragon's beak. It nuzzled her palm gently, tenderly, the way a horse might.

And then Astrid remembered that this was the same beast which had killed Snorri Sigurdson and tried to throw her off a seastack. She tore her hand away as if scalded and took a few steps back, glaring at the confused dragon.

"This is a truce." She explained, realizing how deranged it was to be

talking to the thing at all. "That's it. I build my raft, and we never see each other again. Right?"

It stomped forward and nuzzled her chest. Feeling indebted, she scratched its neck and allowed herself a small smile at the way it crooned and rolled its eyes up, eventually shutting them. It trusted her, she realized. If she had her knife on her at that moment, she could have cut its throat. The thought made her a little guilty; they had declared a truce, after all.

Astrid sighed. "Fine. As long as we're on this island, we help each other. Right? But you can't tell anyone about thiâ€ oh Thor, I'm going mad."

The Dragon kept nuzzling her.

"This is all Hiccup's fault." she snarled.

She spent that morning resting. Using the smaller pieces of driftwood, she even made a fire on the beach, far away from the carefully arranged logs. The Nadder started it with little prompting, and it wasn't long before Astrid had a warm, roaring blaze going. She coaxed it down to red hot coals, and placed a flat, thin rock at the center to let it heat up.

Astrid retrieved one of the fish the Nadder had dropped the previous afternoon- an enormous bass with more than enough meat on it to provide a large meal for a family. She used her small knife to quickly prepare it, cutting out the offal and tossing it to the gulls. She scraped the scales off of it and cut long filets from its flanks, laying the meat on the flat, hot stone and watching it sizzle. The Nadder was watching too, curious about this strange human custom.

Having hot food in her stomach was worth a hundred nights of sleep. Astrid hadn't realized how hungry she was, but she ate almost every scrape of meat she could scrape from the bass' skeleton. She scarfed it down with her knife and her fingers and lay back in the sand, smiling in satisfaction. Hunger, real hunger, was better than the highest-priced spices sold by trader Johann.

The Nadder came to join her, settling down beside like a hen on a clutch of eggs. It curled its tail up and lay down next to her. Feeling safe, Astrid allowed herself to fall into a much more refreshing sleep.

* * *

><p>When she opened her eyes again, the sun was a little past its apex. She yawned and stretched, listening to the Nadder as it stirred beside her. Her fire was out. Small wisps of smoke rise from some warm spots, and she knew it wouldn't take much to coax it back to life.</p>

She rose to her feet and resumed work on her raft. The labor was made much easier by the Nadder's assistance. It had gathered more logs the previous night. There was something endearing about the way it had pulled every large log down the beach and lined them all up in a row. Eager to help, but with no understanding exactly what Astrid was actually attempting. Like a small child, almost.

Astrid set about weaving the ropes between each log, binding them tightly together. It was a strange thing, working beside the dragon. Every time she tried to push or move one of the thick trunks the Nadder would be right beside her, shifting the wood easily with its snout. Within three hours, she had a large raft assembled just below the high tide line. A medium-sized trunk of driftwood sat in the center, bound up as a mast. She had a boom tied to it as well, with her sail storm-rigged to it. The last hour was spent with her ankles in the seawater as she made the finishing touches and checked her crude vessel for weaknesses. It floated well enough, though a little low in the water. She used her last length of rope to bind it to one of the largest logs left on the beach, as an anchor to insure it wouldn't just float away.

In the dying light of the day, she trekked back to her water trap and reset it. The Nadder watched curiously, craning its neck to see over her as she crouched. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise; her back was turned to a dragon, after all. But she remembered how it had helped over the past twenty-four hours, and forced herself to settle down. She tried not to think about what all the people back on Berk would say if they saw her right then.

* * *

><p>The following morning, she woke up early in a state of panic. She had dreamt that the raft, so carefully constructed, had floated away in the night. It did not take more than a quick glance to see it was still there.</p>

The Nadder was there as well, a few meters away. It was wound up in a tight bundle with its head down and its tail curled around itself. She settled back onto the sand for a little while, feeling her spirits rise; today was the day she was setting sail for home.

She couldn't wait to see Berk again and embrace her mother and father. She wondered how many of the others had survived the battle. Hopefully quite a few. What were the kids doing in the arena? Had they kept training without her? Had they missed her much? She was a bit of a task master, she knew, but still. They had always seemed fond of her.

She also needed to talk to Fishlegs. Badly. Had he read the journal yet? Did he know what she knew? Was he testing Hiccup's ideas on the side? Astrid had put the lessons to use and gained an unlikely- not to mention useful- ally in the process, but she hadn't had much choice. Was there a chance they'd be able to bring Dragon and Viking together in the Arena, for instance? How should they approach this? How could this be brought to the village's attention without either one of them being laughed out of the Great Hall? Or declared an exileâ€| or worse?

At last she rose to her feet. The sky was lit in brilliant oranges and purples. The sunlight was shining on the low clouds which crept across the horizon, creating a picturesque moment. Beside her the Nadder stirred, awoken by the vibrations of her steps. The dragon was a light sleeper. Interesting information, if a little pointless at that moment. She wondered if they all were, or just this particular Nadder.

And what the hell was she going to do with it? She couldn't bring it back to Berk. It would get slaughtered. Yet the dragon had followed her everywhere, and it could fly. There was no reason to assume it wouldn't follow her home. She had declared a truce while they were both on the island, but the other residents of Berk wouldn't respect that. Hell, she wasn't even sure the dragon itself understood that their association had to end the moment she left their island.

It was a problem to be considered while she retrieved the satchel.

The dragon followed her down the beach. They walked in thoughtful silence as the sun crested the horizon.

The bag was full again, and Astrid sent up a silent prayer of thanks to the Gods. She didn't want to grow any more reliant on that dragon's help than she already had been. She even quickened her steps a little in an effort to distance herself from the beast which was constantly at her shoulder. There was no outpacing it, of course, but even so she tried as politely as she could. The Nadder seemed to sense something was off. It kept squawking at her and nuzzling her shoulder, and only grew more agitated whenever she pulled away from it.

They reached the raft, and she immediately untied its anchor and coiled up the line, gripping it tightly. The tide was in, and her raft was floating a good half a meter above the sand. She turned towards the sea and searched until she spotted the distant dark shape on the horizon; another island she had spotted on her first day. She needed to know where she was in the archipelago. There was no way she had floated out of Berk's territory. The Uglythugs and the Meatheads were miles and miles away. There was a reason the Tribes only met at the Thing. Perhaps she was near Sunstone or Boarhead or Tall Tree. If she could find any of those three, she could find her way home. It had been a long time since she had had to navigate the isles surrounding Berk, but she remembered enough.

She heard splashing to her side, and droplets of water soaked her clothes. The Nadder was wading clumsily towards her through the surf. The water, which was at her knees, was barely brushing the dragon's ankles. It chirruped at her, its precocious yellow eyes darting between the Viking and the raft.

"No no!" Astrid said, kicking up sea foam as she strode through the waves. She kept one hand locked firmly on the anchor line. She couldn't afford to lose this vessel. "No! You're staying here! We're done. That truce is over, right? This is it. We're done!"

The Dragon squawked in confusion and took a step closer as Astrid reached it. It stuck its snout out and nuzzled her, an action which forced upon her an unwilling smile.

"This is it! We're done. And don't go near Berk. I don't want you toâ€œ!" Her voice died in her throat. She didn't want the dragon to die. She did not want it to get hurt, so much so, in fact, that she was feeling guilty even telling it to leave.

This was ridiculous! Since when did Astrid Hofferson care about a dragon's feelings? Since when did any Viking?

"You and I are enemies!" she tried to explain as it pecked at her stained and dirty clothing, but once again her voice died. The argument sounded hollow, and the reasons behind it unfair. There was a solution, though. Guilt washed over her as she realized what she had to do to fix this mistake, as making friends with this dragon surely was a mistake.

"Come here." She said, reaching out to the dragon. It obeyed happily and she began to scratch its neck vigorously. Where had Hiccup said? Ah, yes: under the chin. She moved her hands up, trying to block out the Nadder's low, oblivious crooning. All of a sudden its eyes rolled back and it folded up and rolled over, sleeping soundly in the shallow surf.

Astrid stared down at it in amazement, and then reached reflexively for her knife. The blade shone in the sunlight, and she stared down at the dragon's unprotected white throat, caught in a moment of indecision. She slipped her knife back into her belt and waved a finger at the prone creature.

"Don't come back to Berk." She warned. "I don't want to have to kill you." With that, she untied her anchor rope, coiled it up and pushed off with her raft, setting sail in the direction she hoped was home.

* * *

><p>And that's part 2 of Astrid's chapter. It is not done yet. We have a whole third chapter to go before she gets back to Berk. Perhaps another 6000-8000 words. Given the length and content, I hope you guys can see why I decided to split this whole section up a little. It's also a major turning point in Astrid's story, so it needs a lot of attention.

Question: do you want me to post the next part of Astrid's journey home, and make it a giant three-part chapter, or do you want to hear from Hiccup again? I'm personally more inclined to the former, but I'm leaving it up to you guys.

In other newsâ€|

Do yourself a favor right now. Open up a second window in your browser and go look up a superb fic called 'Cold North Wind' by Sunflowerb. Don't ask questions, just do it. Trust me, you will not regret it.** Please take the time to go give this story some support. It only has 25 reviews and it deserves like three times as much!**

Also, Midoriko-Sama's Becoming trilogy has received another update. I'm envious of how she always manages to make Berk and the Archipelago feel so well-populated. Hiccup and his journey do not take place in a vacuum in her stories. There are tribes and politics and plenty of different people with a wide-range of perspectives all at play. You're seeing an entire region of the world, and how it goes about solving its problems. Yet she manages to make it so intimately personal at the same time. Not to mention adorable.

**By popular demandâ€| More Astrid! I'm sorry, those of you who asked for Hiccup. He's next I promise. **

**Godâ€| even with three parts, this section is sooo damned loooongâ€| **

* * *

><p>Prodigal Son 17</p>

It was hard not to think about it.

She had let a dragon live. A mistake in any conventional mindset. It occurred to her that that might be the Nadder who would eventually burn her home, or eat her family, or her students. It was very easy to imagine a Nadder doing all of those things, and the thoughts made her sick, but she found it difficult picture that particular Nadder, with its twinkling blue and green coloring. Not difficultâ€| perhaps objectionable would be a better word. She had no doubt that this was the same Nadder which had killed Snorri Sigurdson, yet those two worlds seemed so very far apart. How could a dragon that had treated her so well do something so horrific to other Vikings?

Where to go from here? Not physically- her destination was obvious: that dark blot on the horizon- but mentally. She could kill dragons. She would continue to kill dragons. She had to, in order to defend her village. Animal or not, friendly or not, they still ate livestock and the occasional child. Even if the Vikings stopped killing them, as Hiccup wanted, the raids would still continue and her village would starve to death. Like it or not, they had to keep fighting.

She wondered what she would do if she encountered her Nadder stealing sheep from Silent Sven's farm. What would happen? Would she kill it? No. She would chase it off, or perhaps feed it fish instead. Was there a happy medium somewhere? Somewhere where she could kill some dragons while taking care of others?

What would happen if she found it attacking the children?

Then it would die.

Astrid smiled. Not that she wanted to kill the dragon, it had helped her, after all. She felt very much that they had anâ€| understanding. But she knew that if push came to shove, she was not Hiccup Haddock. She would defend her village. Vikings still came first. She had found a place to make her stand, a place to redraw her lines in the proverbial sand.

Sailing was slow progress. Her raft held up rather well in the calm seas. The wind was weaker than she would have liked, and she drew in her sail, taking pleasure when the resistance increased, and the lines pulled against her grip. She tied them to a notch on one of her logs, and relaxed a little as her raft skimmed forward smoothly, its wake rippling behind her. Every second which ticked by drew her further from that gods forsaken spit of sand, and she began to feel more and more herself.

The bindings creaked, and water lapped at the spaces between the logs. Though Astrid was constantly splashed with cool droplets from

the waves which broke across her bow, she felt dry and warm. She had removed her boots, tying them to the mast and hanging them to dry off. She sat for a while so that her aching feet could bask in the sunlight. She took a great deal of pleasure in letting its warmth seep into her sore muscles. The leather satchel was full of fresh water, and she drank greedily. Her raft was too small to use a full sail, and she had plenty of the canvas left over, which she used to make a small tent, giving herself some shelter. She sat against the mast for a time, holding the tiller, looking backwards at the spit, and making fine course adjustments to keep it centered in her wake as she watched it shrink.

Eventually she grew bored. She kept one hand on her tiller, and with the other, she read Hiccup's journal again, marveling at the boy's combination of ingenuity, cunning, and cowardice. Astrid could not help but notice the parallels between her situation and Toothless the Night Fury's. Both of them had been stranded in Hostile territory, and they both had been forced to work with the enemy out of necessity. Toothless had given up his independence, and she? Well, Astrid had been forced to work with a dragon. Even relied upon it at some points. She had trusted it with her water pouch, and slept beside it. Who had ever heard of such a thing? It would be harder now, she knew, to teach children to kill them.

The island at her stern had shrunk to a spot on the horizon. She wondered whether the Nadder had awoken or not. She hoped not. She wanted to put as much distance between herself and the dragon as possible.

As the sun crept higher, the wind began working against her. Clouds had gathered around the island, and the wind was blowing towards her, forcing her to cross back and forth, zig-zagging towards the distant landmass. It did not help that her raft did not really have a proper keel to keep it from side-slipping in the water. She was forced to work with her sails and tiller to compensate. Over an hour of constant necessary exertion had passed, and she felt as though little to no progress had been made at all. She was sweating and sore, having worked herself to the bone just to stay in the same place against the drafts.

The wind blowing against her was growing more forceful, and it did not bode well, especially with the dark clouds brewing on the horizon. Astrid let her sail out just to the point where it started to billow, then drew the line in a little. The action limited the amount of force the wind applied to her sail. She didn't want to move too fast. The waves were getting choppier, and while her raft had held together perfectly well thus far, she had no wish to test it against the coming storm. Thor looked to be in a foul mood, and Astrid wondered if he was perhaps angry at her for befriending- for using- _using _the dragon like she had instead of killing it.

Another hour passed, and the wind had changed, drawing her raft towards the island. And towards the storm. Her heart sank as lightning arced between the water and the low-hanging clouds. Rain began to patter down, a grey sheet in the distance, obscuring her objective. Flashes of blue lit the clouds as thunder tore apart the sky.

Her raft began to jolt and tip as it rose along the steep peaks and

fell into the deep valleys between each of the waves. She worked to keep her raft at the edge of the storm, but the churning water buffeted her, throwing her tiny craft to and fro, and always pushing her towards the island, further into the gusting winds of the furious storm.

Astrid heard a creaking noise, then a loud splintering noise from her mast. A crack had appeared by a knot at its base, a thin black line slowly crawling up the timber as the wind pulled her sail back and forth. She realized that any hope of sailing through the storm had faded. This had been a long shot from the start, and she was still miles from the island's shoreline. She would just have to buckle down and pray that her raft held together. Aware that her time was limited, Astrid pulled her tiller up out of the water, and set to work on her sail, rolling it up and tying it to lessen the strain the wind put on her weakened mast. Her raft tilted sideways and hit the base of a wave. The water washed over her raft at waist height, and it would have carried her off if it weren't for the tight grip she kept on the rigging.

Then she hit the rain. Or rather, the rain hit her. It beat down upon her desperate little raft in heavy, merciless droplets. Within seconds she was soaked through. Her hair, which had long since come loose from its braid, clung to her shoulders in thick, heavy strands which seemed to weigh her down. The water ran down her face in rivulets, getting in her eyes, and her mouth with every breath she took.

Astrid spotted another furious, frothing wave incoming and dropped to the deck, gripping the logs as hard as she could. It washed over her raft, pulling it underwater, and granting her a moment's respite from the wind. Yet currents and eddies grasped at her, pulling her this way and that.

The feeble craft broke the surface, and she was once again assaulted by the storm. She coughed and hacked, spitting out saltwater. The world had momentarily lost its shape and order, transforming into nebulous patches of gray and blue and black, the chaotic forces of wind, rain and water, and the noise of the storm. Yet Astrid had no time to piece the puzzle together. She barely managed to gulp down a lungful of air before her raft was forced under by a second wave, this one coming from an opposite direction. She was considerably less prepared this time, and the wave swept her clean off the deck of her raft. Ropes line the edges of the raft, fastening the logs together, and she managed to grab hold of one of them. She shut her eyes and let the ocean suck at her body, keeping her grip on the raft's bindings; the only solid anchor in her world.

Once again she had a moment's respite as her raft hit a trough between the ends of two waves. She clambered back aboard, kicking and scraping, hand over hand across the soaked timbers. The mast was sagging terribly, having been splintered further by the rushing waves. Lines blew left right and center, and she realized her tiller was gone completely, as was the oiled satchel and all her fresh water. Dizzy with the chaos and half-blinded by the rain, she fumbled her way across the deck, looking for another handhold. Something to hang on to, to grip against the power of the ocean and the anger of Thor.

Then her raft rose on the swell of a wave, and lightning hit the top

of the mast. A great crack split the world, and her eardrums, and there was a tingling and a mighty flash of light which caused her to cry out. The world had gone silent. Astrid was blinded as if she had been staring too long at the sun. She could barely feel the wind and the rain over the strange tingling in her body. She fell to the deck, struck dumb by the power of the gods.

Something gripped her shoulders, and she felt herself being lifted off the wooden raft, up, up and away into the air, floating freely.

I'm dead. The thought wormed its way through her dazed mind as realizing that a Valkyrie was carrying her off. I've died!

* * *

><p>Astrid was laid on cold stone. Her ears were buzzing incessantly, and the noise of the outside world came through filtered and muffled, as if she were hearing voices underwater. A steady distant drone separate from the high-pitched whine in her head. Yet noise was constant. She tried to shout, but could not hear her own voice. Some feeling had returned to her limbs, though her extremities still tingled. She twitched and shuddered impotently, as if Thor's might was still flowing through her. How mighty Thor must have been, if this were but a spark from his hammer's strike. And what a battle must have been raging in the heavens.</p>

Speaking of hammering, her head was pounding and aching with a steady thrum, muddying her ability to think. Her fingers and toes tingled and crackled with every move. Her face hurt, and it took her a considerable time to realize that it was burned, as if she had sat too close to a bonfire. She tried to open her eyes, but could see only darkness, and the strange purple washes which constantly seeped across her vision.

She could see nothing, hear very little, and her body was only nominally responsive to her commands, yet she felt a warm bulk settle next to her. She was shivering, though she could not discern whether that was due to cold, or to aftershocks from Thor's mighty hammer. All the same it was warm, and softer than the stone so she snuggled up to it as best she could, and let the world float away.

Seconds passed. Or perhaps hours, or days. She didn't know, and she didn't really care either. Awe gripped her as she realized that she had stood at the epicenter of Thor's indomitable rage. He had brought his hammer down upon her raft, and somehow she had survived the blow. She feared what would happen when he learned that fact, but to feel even that tiny fraction of the god's raw power!

She drifted in and out of sleep, random thoughts fluttering aimlessly across her mind. Unwilling to face the present, with its pain and blindness, her mind took refuge in the past, stuck somewhere in the realm between Dream and Memory.

Her family, gathered around the blazing fire at the center of the Hofferson's hall. Astrid was sitting between her mother's knees, watching her father Haldor Hofferson, and her uncle Finn play a game of King's Table. Astrid had never been very close to her father, but she adored her uncle Finn. He had no children of his own, but Astrid was his favorite. She remembered how his eyes crinkled in the corners

when he smiled, and his booming laugh. He used to tell her stories of the battles between the Aesir and the Jotun, and of the Great War which united all the gods. He told her more stories. Stories about honor and the glory of battle. He taught her of Ragnarok, and that some battles were worth fighting even if losing was foretold.

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Finn had played with her more than her siblings, encouraged her more, and taught her more about winning and losing, about being competitive. Uncle Finn had taught her how to be a Viking Warrior. They had left the rest of the Hofferson family behind and gone hunting together, deep in the forests of Berk. They had gone sailing together, far from the island. He had taught her how to swing an axe. He taught her how to move, how to stand, how to think. He taught her to take care of her body. He taught her how to devote herself to the Warrior Ideal. Eventually he caught a Terrible Terror, and taught her how to maim and kill her enemies. 'When you carry this weapon, Astrid, you carry all of us with you.'

_Finn had given Astrid her first axe. She dreamt of the day she didn't use it. While Arvendale's ethereal fire shimmered in the skies above, her brave uncle had planted himself on a bridge, standing between his village and harm. Between Astrid and the Flightmare.

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'Here I am ungodly beast!' he had cried, 'Fearless Finn Hofferson! I've been waiting ten years for this moment! Come and get me if you dare!' _

And it had.

Little Astrid Hofferson had stood in the shadows, watching as the Flightmare bit her beloved uncle clean in two. She had stood there frozen just as he had been. The Flightmare had gone on to terrorize the village. The following morning the crying started. Astrid had cried for days. Her hall had seemed so empty, her life so colorless. And after she was done crying she had sworn to herself not to shed a tear again. Berk remembered Finn as a joke. Frozen Finn Hofferson. Astrid hated them for it. She knew the truth: Finn had been utterly fearless. He had challenged Hel's demon, stood tall and called it out while the rest of Berk had blown its horns and run for cover.

That summer she had traveled with her family to the holy temple of Uppsala. She had watched her sisters and cousins pray and sacrifice to Sif, Idun, Frey and Freya. Prayers for fertility, for youthfulness, for marriage!

And then Astrid's turn had come. There, in front of her family she too had knelt before the statues of the gods, but not in front of Freya. No, she kneeled before Thor and Odin, and in her Uncle's name she pledged herself to Berk as a Skjoldmo. A shield maiden. A warrior, just as her uncle Finn had been. She recalled the confusion of her sisters and cousins, her father's shock, and her mother's pride.

Her dreams brought her forward in time until she first stood in the dragon training arena. She remembered how much it had meant to her, to enter the Kill Ring and train with the other warriors. She remembered how little it had meant to Hiccup Haddock.

Painâ€| love it.

In her dream state, Astrid remembered the surge of anger. The snide tone, the sarcasm. How dare he? Pain had meant nothing to Finn Hofferson. Pain was a risk. The reward was honor, and more importantly the safety of Berk. That was something worth dying for. Finn had taught her that.

Yet somehow that snide little fishbone had surpassed them. Somehow he surpassed her. Somehow he became Champion.

Astrid remembered feeling jealousy, and rage. Most of all she felt shame. For all her training, for all her determination, for all that Uncle Finn had taught her, Astrid had lost to the boy who somehow managed to burn down half of Berk every other week even without the Dragons' help. She could only imagine the look which Uncle Finn would have worn, up in Valhalla.

_Then Hiccup Haddock had disappeared, and Astrid could not have been happier. She faced the Nightmare in the arena three months later. She bathed in its blood, took its head and presented it to Berk's chief.

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_Stoick the Vast had given her all due honors, though his voice was hollow and tearful. He was still in mourning for his son and the Haddock line. The village followed his example, standing silently until necessity and tradition prompted them to clap. Never had an honor been awarded more somberly. _

Astrid remembered being the only one who smiled. She was imagining her Uncle doing the same.

_The thought had haunted her for a time that her victory over Hiccup was unfair. That she was still second. She had won by default, after all. Yet she fought back against those doubts as she did everything else: facing them down and battering them into the dust. Dragon training was there to teach young Vikings how to fight dragons. If Hiccup had gotten killed and eaten, then clearly the training hadn't worked, had it? That made sense. And yet, the same thing had happened to her uncle Finn, and he was more experienced than both Astrid and Hiccup combined. _

The next raid, Astrid resolved to prove to Berk that she deserved her honors, and when the chance came about she killed a Gronckle and a Nadder. She could feel her Uncle Finn smiling down at her.

The raid after that, she defended her own former classmates against another Nightmare. During the next, she rid the village of two Zipplebacks which were terrorizing the sheep farms. In a matter of months she had proven herself as capable as any other warrior in Stoick's army.

_A year passed and Arvendale's ghostly fire once again filled the sky. Astrid Hofferson had stood tall on the bridge and called out Hel's demon, saying the words she had waited ten long, cold winters to say. 'Leave Berk now and never come back! Here I am, Ungodly Beast! Fearless Astrid Hofferson! Come and get me if you dare!' _

_And it had ignored her completely, fluttering past her towards Berk,

and towards the rivermouth, chasing some unseen prey through the clouds. Astrid had pursued it all night, firing arrows, flailing her axe and screaming challenges well into the morning when it finally flew out to sea, following the glowing river._

Astrid cried a second time that morning. She had fought so hard and waited so long, yet the demon had clearly not thought her a worthy challenger. Not as worthy as her Uncle Finn. The chance to avenge his honor and good name, to prove herself at last, had been lost.

Her mother had comforted her. Her father had laid a hand on her shoulder. Her sisters and cousins, a few of them with husbands of their own, had looked on with impatience, curiosity, and indifference. She realized how alone she was in the world. Like Finn, only she had stood before the Flightmare. Like Finn, she had no family or children of her own. She had not prayed for marriage beside her sisters and cousins. She was destined to die in battle, as her uncle had. She was a member of her family, but they did not laugh together as they once did. She awoke before they rose, and arrived long after they had fallen asleep. Her parents were proud and supportive, if a little melancholy. She loved her mother, but in everything else, her training came first. The rest of her family treated her politely, but kept her at a distance. Perhaps so that it would hurt less when the time came. There was a space there. A division which only widened with time.

A year passed, and more raids came and went. Astrid tried harder, and killed every dragon she saw, determined to prove herself a worthy enemy for the Flightmare. Determined to defend Berk. Another year, more of her sisters and cousins disappeared into the halls of other Hooligan clans. A brother or two were married, but who was counting? More raids, more killing, more training. Astrid received a few proposals in that time. Her family were handed contracts from interested suitors. Her father agreed, wife and daughter did not. Father argued, and his wife threatened him with divorce.

_After that all suitors were ignored. More isolation between her and the rest of the village. But that was okay. Berkians greeted her with grim nods, finally understanding the course she had set for herself. They grew quiet around her. Snotlout continued to pursue her, and she ignored him as she always had. _

The days grew longer and darker. Wounded deeply by his son's death, Stoick the Vast had wrapped himself in a blanket of stone, and his silence reflected on Berk itself. It grew into a quiet, tense village. A grim place, where laughter was as rare as sunshine.

The following year Fishlegs and Ruffnut were married. The festivities carried on for almost a week before they were cut short by a death in the training ring. A Nadder had eaten one of the children.

Gobber never forgave himself, and aside from his necessary work as the village's smith, he retired almost entirely from public life, imposing solitude upon himself in much the same way Stoick and Astrid had.

_The following few weeks possessed an air of uncertainty. Due to the concurrence of the two events, rumors circulated that Ruffnut's marriage had been cursed by the gods. The raids had taken their toll

on morale, with the dragons always taking a little more than the Vikings could easily recover. The loss of a promising young warrior was truly disheartening. Quiet words were spoken in dark corners of the great hall. Warriors died every raid, and with no new recruits being trained, many began to talk of packing up and sailing away to a different island. There was talk of defeat. Of desertion. Berk began to splinter. _

To Fearless Astrid Hofferson, that was unacceptable. Some battles were worth fighting, even if losing was foretold. Seeing what was happening to her village, she stepped up to the plate. On an autumn morning, the grass cold, and stiff with frost, she trudged across the village to the Ragason farm and the Ingvarson homesteads. She pounded harshly on the doors one, two, three times.

Each door was opened by a somber, tired Viking.

"_Dragon Training." Astrid would say shortly. "Get your child dressed. Give him a weapon."_

_And they would vanish, only to reappear a few minutes later with their eldest child. Astrid would grab her recruit by the scruff of the neck, and drag him out the door and down the steps.

"March!"_

_The children followed her. Uncertainly at first, yet growing more confident as their numbers increased. An hour later Astrid stood in the arena with two dozen recruits, lined up against the heavy portcullis. She was so much taller than they were. They were, most of them, just under fourteen winters; nearly reaching adulthood. Yet none of them remembered Fearless Finn. The oldest ones barely remembered Hiccup Haddock. For the first time, Astrid felt old.

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She watched them. Their younger eyes lingered on the weeks-old bloodstain near the center of the arena. They clutched their weapons tightly, not with confidence, but with fear. Every one of them had been in the arena when Sluglout had died.

"_What do you fear?"_

"_Pain and death." The youngest of their number said. His name, Astrid later learned, was Osmand._

"_The only thing to fear about pain is that it hinders your ability to fight." Astrid replied coldly. "The only thing to fear in death is not gripping your weapon. So long as you have your weapon, you will go to Valhalla."_

She let the Nadder out and killed it there, in front of them. She let it linger first. She cut off its tail when it tried to spike her, slit its wings when it tried to fly. She broke its teeth when it tried to bite her and in the end she let it die. Not immediately though; its moans were pitiful, its cries pleading and pathetic but she let it linger. She wanted to show them the true nature of the creature they were dealing with. She wanted to destroy their fear. They feared pain and death, so did the beasts. They were capable of making dragons feel fear.

_When she was done with the Nadder, she opened the Nightmare pen.

Then the Gronckle. Over that time a crowd had gathered around the arena, watching her performance and cheering with every dive, summersault, and near-miss. Snotlout was there as well, watching her with hungry eyes._

When she was done, three dead dragons lay in the arena. The stone floor was soaked and stained and slippery with blood. She used that blood to paint the stunned faces of her young charges, and then she taught them how to hold their arms, reciting the mantra which her uncle Finn had taught her: "When you carry this weapon, you carry all of us with you."

She looked up at the crowd. Stoick the Vast was standing there, his bulky, muscular silhouette standing out. She had not consulted him when she decided to restart dragon training. She had acted independently. She wondered if he were about to tell her to stop, but her chief gave one slow, deep, approving nod, and then he turned on his heel and stalked away.

From then on, every morning before dawn broke, every household with a child would receive three booming knocks. The door would open.

"_Dragon training." She would say._

The door would close. It would open again and her student would be deposited at her feet.

"_March." She would say._

Within two weeks, she no longer had to knock. The children were already there. Within three weeks, they all wore red face paint. She saw how they looked up to her, an echo from her own childhood. So she taught them how to move, how to stand, how to think. She taught them how to take care of their bodies. She taught them how to devote themselves to the Warrior Ideal. Eventually she brought a box of Terrible Terrors to the arena and taught them how to main, and how to kill their enemies.

Then young Osmand had come up to her with the Book of Dragons and shown her a certain sketchâ€!

* * *

><p>Astrid awoke and her head was clear. Her vision was foggy, but she could make out shapes and colors, which was an enormous and promising improvement. Her hearing had returned as well. Her toes and fingertips still tingled, but she could feel, for the most part, everything around her. Her entire body once again ached. It felt as though she had been training hard for several days with no rest. Thor's power had caused her to convulse and twitch, leaving her stiff and sore.</p>

She was lying in a cave, and could see daylight through a right, circular entrance. Water fell down the cave mouth in steady droplets. She could hear each one impact as it hit the ground with a steady patter. It was not rain; the sun was out. Yet the patter was steady enough to suggest that there was a water source somewhere above her. Wherever she wasâ€!

The entrance was blocked for a moment as a bulky shape stomped into the cavern. Astrid tensed, scrambling for a weapon. Not only did she come up empty, but her limbs still weren't moving quite right, merely flailing in the direction she wanted them to travel. The lack of control was worrying, and to top things off, when she scraped her knuckles on the rocky floor, she felt no pain at all.

The shape squawked, and Astrid froze. She rose on wobbly legs and faced her rescuer head on. It was the Nadder. Her Nadder. The one she had left behind on that horrible spit of land. The dragon tromped to a halt in front of her and gracefully leaned down to nuzzle Astrid's cheek, which she allowed it to do.

"You saved me." She murmured, raising a hand to rub its beak. She realized that she could only feel the dragon's warm scales on some patches of her palm, but on others she felt nothing at all. Not warmth nor cold. A slight tingle, perhaps. It was strange, as if she were wearing a thin glove with several large holes in it. Places where her skin touched the outside air, places where it didn't. She felt the stirrings of panic, but suppressed them just as she did during battle. It was something to explore once she got back to Berk.

The dragon was crooning softly, pecking at her stiff clothing. Its teeth were so very close, gums shining with spittle, and its hot stinky breath puffing against her threadbare tunic. Yet Astrid was not afraid. On the contrary, she felt relieved. More than that, indebted. She knew the power of Thor's rage, and she was glad to have an ally willing to brave it for her. She reached up and gave the nadder a fond scratch.

A thought occurred to her. "Was Thor angry with me for letting you live, or for leaving you behind? If he wanted you to die he could have struck you from the sky himself, right? But his lightning hit my raft!"

The Nadder squawked at her, sensing her distress.

"Listen, I don't speak Dragon." Astrid said, smoothing its scales (the nadder seemed to like that), "And I doubt you speak Human. But I know what I owe you. You got me food and water. You helped me build my raft. And when that didn't work you defied the Gods to save me. So we're in this together now. I don't know if all dragons are evil, but I know you aren't."

The nadder had paused, listening intently. Astrid smiled ruefully at it. She spoke softly. "Maybe you're their Hiccup. You don't think like the rest of them do. Maybe that Night Fury didn't either. I don't know."

The nadder tilted its head to the side to examine her. The pupils of its yellow eyes were wide, and it stunned her how dramatically that small thing changed its entire appearance. It had transformed from something alien and threatening to friendly and doting.

"Either Thor wants us to be together, or he wants us both dead. For better or worse we're in this together now." Astrid said. As for the village, she would have to figure that out when she got back. Fishlegs was on her side, at least. She had an ally, and that already put her ahead of Hiccup.

The dragon warbled at her, and then its eyes narrowed slightly. It lifted its massive head and to Astrid's amazement, clamped her messy hair in its beak and tugged at a knot, pulling her sideways.

"Ow! That hurts! What are you doing?" Astrid swung out and smacked it in the jaw with her fist. It let go immediately and backed up a step, squawking indignantly.

"Never do that again!" Astrid snapped, waving a warning finger at her dragon. To her surprise, it shrank from her scolding the way a dog would have.

Astrid rubbed her sore scalp and glared at it. "That's my hair!"

They glared at each other. The Nadder stomped its foot and chirped insistently, glaring at the knotted mess.

"Don't like it, huh? Well guess what: It isn't your business."

Its eyes narrowed further.

"Fine." Astrid pulled her knife out of her belt. It was the only thing which had survived her disastrous voyage. "Fine." She said again. She found the knot and brought the knife up to cut the hair away. The dragon stepped forward, warbling at her in a worried voice. Its eyes were wide as it watched her cut the hair away. She tossed the knot on the floor. "You happy now?"

The dragon had gone silent. It was staring at her in shock, its gaze occasionally darting down to the lock of hair, and back up to her scalp.

"That's right I can cut it off if I want. There you go! Burn it or eat it or something. Anything. I don't care! It's not my problem anymore." She kicked the fuzzy blonde lock to the side, where a gout of hot Nadder fire vaporized it and turned the surrounding rock into a molten red pit. Surprised, Astrid stumbled backwards and landed painfully on her bottom. The Nadder sniffed the hot patch, warbled proudly and turned to her with its tongue lolling out.

"Good job!" Astrid said weakly.

It nuzzled her, crooning softly

"Well now we're in this!" Astrid told it, "What should I call you?"

The Nadder plomped itself down across from her. Its fringe twitched in tune with her voice.

"That was brave of you, scooping me out of the storm like that." The Viking said thoughtfully. "Like a warrior or a Valkyrie. Your name should be something strong and brave. How about Brunhilda? That's my mother's name."

The dragon made a warbling noise that, to Astrid, sounded somewhat negative. "Yeah! That would be kind of awkward, wouldn't it? Name a dragon after my mum... I don't think she'd like that very much. One

of the other Valkyries, then? But I don't even know if you're a girl or a boy." Her curiosity spiked, Astrid leaned out a little to check. There was nothing suggestively male in the dragon's anatomy. Nothingâ€œ pokey. She realized the dragon was giving her a very wary look. Astrid cleared her throat awkwardly and gave up on her inquiry, deciding that so far as she knew, the dragon was female. She said, "Besides, it wasn't a battlefield, really. It was a storm. What about something simpler? What about Thunder-Dragon or Storm-Flyer?"

The Dragon perked up, its pupils widening. It lookedâ€œ cute. Godsâ€œ Astrid decided that Thor's hammerblow must have done something to her brain.

"That's still a bit of a mouthful. How about just Stormfly?"

It chirruped. The noise was cheerful enough.

"Your name is Stormfly." Astrid decided. "Good enough?"

Stormfly mouth her mouth deposited a dead fish in Astrid's lap.

* * *

><p>An hour later they exited the cave. Astrid's legs were cramping up, the muscles tensing painfully; another lingering effect of Thor's power. She steadied herself by gripping the horn on Stormfly's snout. The dragon seemed really quite patient about it. She seemed to sense that Astrid was in a fair amount of pain.</p>

They were standing on a steep mountainside. In front of Astrid stretched the treetops of a tall, dense forest, shrouded in fog. Far ahead of her, and to her right, were enormous sea stacks, each with its own shrouded forest. There were four in total, plus the one she was currently standing on. They looked like the grasping fingers of a giant, stretching skywards.

Berk lay at the foot of an enormous mountain, and each one of the sea stacks could easily match its height. Each of the tall, stone monoliths had its own forest, and they met in the center to form the hand's mist-filled 'palm'.

"This is Breakneck Bog." Astrid realized, feeling a sudden surge of shock and fear. She had grown up hearing stories about Breakneck Bog. Many a ship had sailed into its mists, never to return. She remembered sitting on her grandfather's boney knees, listening intently as he told stories of pirates and black magic. Many claimed a monster lived there, moving under the cover of the thick fog which lay like a sheet across the island. Legend had it that it actually was the left hand of a slain Jotun, tossed from Asgard by Thor. The hand was still stretched skywards, reaching vengefully for his opponent. Astrid Hofferson was standing on the hand of a dead giant.

This was a cursed place, but there was good news as well; she knew where it was. Breakneck Bog lay northeast of Berk. She could get home now! The sudden surge of hope was nearly enough to offset her dismay. Stormfly stood beside her, letting out a gentle warble, and Astrid felt comforted. She breathed a long sigh. "At least the air is clear up hereâ€œ!"

The climb down looked rocky and treacherous. It would be far worse with the way her legs were cramping up. Even so, she took a few precarious steps forwards. The surface was cracked, dry sand which slipped and slid under her foot with every step, forcing her to lean back against the side of the steep cliff to prevent herself from tumbling. It was far too risky. Besides that, what exactly would she achieve by getting to the bottom? Then she would be trudging through the swamp, with the fog monster hunting her. She would have to find a shipwreck, or a pirate camp and get her hands on rope. Then she would have to gather timber and build another raftâ€|

Was that the plan again? It had worked out so well the first timeâ€|

Astrid looked back up at Stormfly, an idea taking root in her mind. It was insane, of course. But her entire week had been insane. How was this any different? And Hiccup had already done it. Stormfly had proven she could carry Astrid's weight.

She clambered carefully back up the hill, wincing as a cramp forced one of her legs completely straight. Gods above! This climb had been a lot short going down than coming up!

Stormfly was waiting for her at the cave entrance, head cocked to one side as she observed Astrid's slow, awkward progress. At the last few feet, the dragon leaned down and plucked Astrid off the mountain, lifting her up to the mouth of the cave.

"Thanks, Stormfly." They stared out at the enormous stone fingers reaching so high into the air, and the distant white lines of breaking waves far below. Breakneck Bog felt like its own little world, held in the palm of a giant's hand.

"Stormfly, I need a favour." Astrid said. "Can Iâ€| would you let me ride you?"

The dragon squawked curiously.

"I can't go out on another raft." She explained apologetically. "And I need to get homeâ€|" Of course, that would mean bringing the Nadder home with her. How that was going to play outâ€|? Who knew? It was a problem to be solved later. Right nowâ€| there was only one option.

It was just a matter of convincing the dragon it was a good idea.

She reached out her hand and rubbed Stormfly's nose. "I know it's going to be weird. It's going to be weird for me too. But I need help."

Stormfly was as unresponsive as ever. Astrid realized that it was unlikely the dragon understood much of what she was saying, and immediately felt like an idiot. At least the cramp had faded, though she had no idea when it would be back.

"Alright," Astrid said, "Screw it." She grabbed one of the Nadder's frills and swung herself up onto Stormfly's back, with her knees sitting just ahead of the wings. The dragon squawked loudly in protest, and shook herself from side to side. Astrid ducked below her

companion's frill and held on for dear life. Suddenly this didn't seem like such a good idea.

Unable to dislodge Astrid, Stormfly promptly took off, leaping out into empty space. The bottom of Astrid's stomach dropped out, and her world turned upside down as they plummeted head-first towards Breakneck Bog. She was somewhat sheltered from the wind, clinging as tightly as she was to Stormfly's neck. Gravity suddenly returned as the dragon levelled off. Astrid was granted barely a second's pause before the mighty wings on either side began to pump the air around them, drawing the dragon higher and higher and higher until they were above the clouds, and the island of Breakneck Bog, with its five enormous fingers, was the size of Astrid's palm.

Stormfly was squawking and chirping wildly, rolling, diving, and pitching through the air.

The dragon began to spin from side to side, and at the worst moment possible, Astrid's leg began to spasm, causing waves of pain which demanded that she straighten it out.

"I'm sorry!" Astrid shrieked. She could feel her grip loosening as the dragon's frantic movements threatened to pull her off. "Please stop! Please, I'm sorry! I'm Sorry!"

She lost her grip. One moment she was wrapped around Stormfly's neck. The next, she was flying freely through the air. What once had been a dragon, turned into a rapidly shrinking blue dot, barely visible against the sky. Astrid could see the ocean far below, and the giant's demonic stone hand rising up out of the distant, tiny waves to catch her. She tried to scream, but the wind stole her breath away, and made her eyes tear up. She realized she was about to die. She wondered how she was going to explain this to her Uncle Finn.

Then a pair of wings appeared. Stormfly was back, falling with her. The dragon matched her speed and moved towards her. Claws gripped Astrid's shoulders as the dragon carefully pulled both of them out of their fall. They leveled off near the treetops, and immediately began another ascent. Astrid feared for a moment that the dragon meant to drop her from a great height, but instead the Nadder deposited her on a wide, sheltered cliff.

Astrid landed with a huff, groaning as the muscles in her leg clenched. She rammed her fist into the outside of her hip in the hopes that it might loosen something up, but that only served to add another layer of pain to her troubles.

Stormfly kicked up enormous clods of dirt when she landed, and she was very clearly angry. She hopped from foot to foot wings and frill spread wide, vibrating in a display of aggression and indignation. She fired a gout of flame at the ground, scorching a great black smoking line between her and Astrid then she stomped one final time, cocked her head, and glared down imperiously at the prostrate Viking.

"Alright—" Astrid winced, propping herself up on her elbow, "That may

have been a little presumptuous of me. I'm sorry. Alright? I'm sorry."

Stormfly roared at her.

"Look, I need to get home but I can't build another raft and I can't swim that far—" she dared to glance over the edge of her cliff, and saw a three-hundred foot drop into Breakneck Bog. "-And I certainly can't get off this cliff. I need to fly. I needâ€|" she hesitated. "I need you. And I never thought I'd say that to a dragon, so please don't make me say it twice."

Stormfly planted her feet firmly against the rock and dipped her head. She let out a single, demanding squawk.

"Uhhhg. Fine. I need you." Astrid spread her arms and flung herself upwards dramatically onto one knee. "I need your help. You've done so much for me already. I owe you and I know that. I understand. I'm sorry I just jumped on you like that. I should have waited to make sure you were okay with it. I'm sorry I didn't ask, but I need your help again. Alright?"

Stormfly perked up. Her pupils widened and her frill lowered. She waddled over, looking considerably less aggressive. She crossed the line smugly, but stood before Astrid and lowered her head until her companion could easily climb on.

Astrid waited a moment longer for the pain in her leg to fade. Her muscle loosened, and she massaged the tender area at her hip. She threw out a couple kicks, leaning on Stormfly for support as she tested her limb.

"I'll tell you something, girl," she said to the dragon, "Thor is not getting any sacrifices from me for a looong time. You ready?"

Stormfly squawked an assent.

"Alright. Round two." Astrid flung her leg over the Nadder's neck and shifted backwards under her knees were tucked safely around the dragon's wing joints. Stormfly flexed her wings and took a few paces back and forth on the cliff, getting used to the weight. To Astrid's amazement, the dragon suddenly folded up its wings and sat down in what was a clear indication for her to dismount.

So she did, frowning at her ally. The dragon turned its back to her and squawked at her over its shoulder.

"You want me toâ€| to what? Get on from the back?"

Another squawk.

"â€|Alright." Astrid said doubtfully as she eyed the dragon's bare back. "But you catch me if I slide off, alright?" she could have sword the Nadder rolled its eyes. The noise it made was certainly one of exasperation.

She mounted again, this time with her knees behind Stormfly's wings. The Nadder seemed much happier with this new arrangement, and it wasn't long before the dragon was standing at the cliff's edge, wings

spread, ready to fly.

"Can we take it easy this time?" Astrid asked. "Just some gliding, okay girl?" She patted Stormfly behind the frill, and the dragon warbled an assent. "Nothing too crazy."

The second time was worse. The flying was much calmer, true, but the first time, Astrid hadn't known what to expect. She hadn't realized how the world seemed to shrink away, or how terrifying it was, trusting her life so completely to the dragon's aerial competence. A thousand thoughts whizzed through her head. What if Stormfly got tired? What if Astrid lost her grip? What if the dragon's wing ripped, or she couldn't carry the weight or one of any thousand spontaneous disasters occurred.

On the flipside, flying was amazing. Once Astrid was able to put aside her anxieties- Stormfly seemed greatly relieved- she realized how glorious it was to soar over the island. She realized how much less threatening the world seemed from so high above. They spent some time, gliding in nearly straight lines back and forth across Breakneck Bog. Astrid encountered a moment or two of panic as Stormfly hit a rough patch and had to ascend a few feet to avoid it, but it passed, and soon the Viking warrior found herself confident enough to sit upright and enjoy the sunlight and the gentle wind as they glided slowly back and forth through the towering fingers of the giant's hand.

Off in the distance, Astrid could see the shapes of circling gulls, mere dots of white against the dark rocky cliffs of the giant's fingers. One of the birds disappeared into a low cloud which floated near the base of one of the monolithsâ€| and failed to re-emerge from the other side. The patch of mist itself was moving in a peculiar way; purposefully, and against the prevailing wind. It left a dark trail behind it, and the grey vapor looked oddly similar to the ethereal fog which had surrounded the Dragon's Nest.

"Follow that fog!" Astrid ordered, pointing. Stormfly chittered in annoyance, swerving in the general direction, but she obviously didn't know exactly what her rider was referring to. Astrid clearly needed to find a different way to communicate her needs. How had Hiccup done it? Wellâ€| he had designed that false tailfin, but he had also explained that leaning was a good way to steer.

Trouble was, they were soaring a good hundred and fifty feet in the air, above the birds and the fog and the distant bog below. Astrid was not particularly keen on leaning; she had no safety harness as Hiccup had built. She reminded herself that she was a Viking Warrior. Pain and death were occupational hazards, and this was something she was going to have to learn how to do if she ever wanted to get home again. Another raft was not an option.

She grimaced against the painful cramps in her legs, grabbed the spines on Stormfly's frill, and leaned sideways. The ground was so very far away, and Astrid found immediately that if she thought of it as a model or a painting her fear became much easier to deal with.

Her dragon squawked in annoyance, but banked right, towards the mysterious patch of fog which was floating above the treetops. Astrid leaned forward, pushing Stormfly's head down as apologetically as she

could. The dragon followed instinctively, and the bottom of Astrid's stomach dropped out as they descended at a steep angle. She leaned back, and the dragon followed suit, levelling off a good fifty feet above the strange mist.

The cloud was moving against the wind, and in a particular direction-towards the largest of the five gargantuan monoliths which circled Breakneck Bog. As she watched it, Astrid recalled that terrible battle at Helheim's gate. The way a hundred small dragons used the fog as cover. The way they zipped across the longships, snatching up weapons and sometimes entire Vikings. She felt a sudden surge of duty to the village, and the desire to investigate this strange fog increased tenfold.

Uncle Finn had taught her a few things about hunting. Understanding the relationship between scent and wind was absolutely essential. Animals usually had an extraordinary sense of smell. A trick to hunting was to set up a Drive. The hunter was to walk along a straight line and let her scent carry downwind, driving any animals in the area away in a predictable direction. Then she circled and approached them from the leeward side, ensuring that they were unaware of her and had their senses concentrated in the opposite direction.

In this case, Astrid was not hunting to catch, but rather hunting to follow. She and Stormfly kept several dozen feet above the mist, and always to its leeward side. It was traveling against the wind, which made the job easier, but she wanted to insure that whatever it was wouldn't sense them.

The grey blob wound its way across the treetops and up the steep hill to the base of the giant's thumb. It suddenly flitted upwards, rose two hundred feet up the cliff face, and entered a cave very similar to the one in which Astrid had first awoken.

She leaned back, pulling Stormfly's spines to slow them down. They hovered near the cave entrance, watching the black oval for any signs of aggression.

"Take me in, Stormfly." She ordered. This time the dragon seemed to know what she was saying. They flitted inwards and landed in the cave entrance. Astrid hopped off her dragon's back and pulled out her knife. The cave was dank and dark and barely lit. Rivulets of water ran down the curved stone walls on either side, forming channels which ran further into the cave.

"Stay here." Astrid whispered. She crept forward slowly, grunting as the cramp returned. She was forced to pause and wait for the spasm to pass before she could continue onwards. The cave wound on for a hundred meters or so before it broke out into a larger cavern.

Dragons were there. Dozens of them, lit by a faint beam of sunlight which poured through a crack in the ceiling. The beasts were small and darkly colored, though their snouts were covered by a protective layer of bone. As they moved and chattered and growled at one another, Astrid noted the strange smoke which billowed from their mouths. The smoke was generated by the dragons themselves! No wonder it had behaved so strangely!

They were working on a project in the center of the room; a giant hive-like nest, constructed entirely of metal. Weapons and armour were there, but also nails and shovels and picks and pots and pans and lanterns and cutleryâ€¦ any metal of any kind. The cave was constantly being lit up with small hot tongues of flame as they welded each new addition to their nest. Closer to Astrid was a large pile of loose junk, all of it metal. Among it were weapons and dead bodies from Berk's armada.

They were after the chainmail, Astrid realized. That was why the tiny dragons carried off entire warriors and stole weapons. It wasn't anything like intelligent cowardly tactics. They just wanted the metal for their nest!

This was information she had to get back to Berk. They could adjust their tactics during the next attack. Perhaps covering or hiding the metal. Along with Eels nailed to the bow and stern and hung along the edges to drive the larger dragons awayâ€¦

Yes. Yes! It could work! They could reach the nest!

Stunned, she recognized her axe and shield, placed off to the side on the pile of loose building material. She felt a surge of possessiveness, and darted out to grab it. The dragons reacted immediately. The occasional chirping and nattering became an angry growling buzz. She grabbed her shield first and slung it across her back, taking her axe with her other hand. She turned and sprinted towards the exit, with dozens of angry dragons in tow.

Astrid could hear the buzzing behind her as she ran. Like a swarm of angry, smoke-spitting bees, the dragons pursued, nipping at her heels. And there was the cave entrance approaching at great speed, but no dragon waiting to pick her up. Astrid had no time to think, only act. She knew if she stopped, she was dead. Instead she sped up and threw herself out of the cave and into the sunlight and open air, gripping her axe tightly. She felt her stomach lurch. The wind blasted at her face, and the distant green treetops rushed up to meet her.

"Stoooormflyyyyy!"

Suddenly her view was blocked by light blue wings and a scaly, reptilian spine. The dragon was beneath her! She landed hard, and heard Stormfly's pained grunt, but the dragon took off as soon as she locked her knees. They shot across the treetops, sending tendrils of fog writhing in the air behind them. The tiny dragons followed, squeaking, snarling, and belching that thick acrid smoke.

"Get higher!" Struggling against the stiff wind, Astrid crawled forward, grabbed the spines on Stormfly's frill and pulled, forcing the dragon upwards. Stormfly's wings pumped on either side. Their flight path was nearly vertical. Astrid leaned close to the dragon's back, gripping tightly. She glanced backwards and saw the smokey cloud falling behind but still in pursuit. Each time Stormfly beat her wings the tiny dragons were flung downwards in a gust of wind.

They slowed as the swarming cloud sank back towards the distant island, but Stormfly wasn't done. With a great roar the Nadder turned in midair, tucking its wings in close and diving towards the flock.

All Astrid could do was hold on, as Stormfly careened downwards. As they reached the smoke, the dragon let out a great cone of white-hot, sparking fire straight into the center of the swarm. Quite a few cooked corpses dropped out of the cloud and down into the bog below. Coming to the instant, unanimous conclusion that one axe and shield weren't worth the trouble, the tiny dragons broke formation and fled back to their cave.

"WHOOO HOOOO!" Astrid screamed, reveling in the excitement, and the incredible display of fury. "Take that you bastards! Good girl, Stormfly!"

Satisfied that her rider was safe, Stormfly levelled off, and woman and dragon glided lazily out to sea, and towards Berk.

* * *

><p>I hope the writing was clear enough, but just in case it wasn't, Astrid's raft got hit by lightning. Being in such close proximity to a lightning strike can result in sometimes permanent hearing loss, sometimes permanent blindness, nerve damage ranging from minor to severe, possible concussion from the shockwave, and burns. Yikes.

Fright of passage is one of my favorite episodes of RoB. It is canon that Finn is Astrid's uncle, but I believe that if the show weren't for kids, he would have been her father. There's a lot that's implied there, and it's a real shame that they set such strict expectations to which the show must conform. It is a younger children's show, and they nerfed everything. It could be so much better if it were but a little bit darker. Another character who suffers greatly from the neutering is Dagur the Deranged. I get the impression that he is supposed to be a Viking Joker, but they can't make him as crazy and dangerous as they want him to be.

Breakneck Bog does look like a giant hand. It's one of the coolest island designs I've seen in a long time.

I'd like to know what you thought of Astrid's dream sequence.

18. Chapter 18

This chapter came out later than usual because my uncle was in heart surgery, and I had to travel a fair distance to his place to help him recover.

Prodigal Son 18

Hiccup and Artemisia were seated at the top of a hill several miles south of Alexandria. The sky was moonless and cloudless but the stars shone bright, blue and cold. Every constellation was crisp and clean. Jupiter and Venus were both visible close to the horizon. The green cloud of the Milky Way galaxy arced over their heads like the backbone of the night. The sight was magnificent.

They were leaning back against Toothless' flank. Artemisia had not taken well to flying at first. She had held tightly onto Hiccup, and

though he knew of her irreverent attitudes, he was sure he heard her praying under her breath. Toothless had flown in a calm, relatively straight line. Gliding, more than flying, and only flapping his wings to gain height or avoid turbulence.

Hiccup had told her everything. The last hour had been spent in silence as she absorbed his story, and at that moment he had only one question. One which had weighed on his mind for years. "Am I a coward?"

She chuckled.

"That is a question with no easy answer, Hiccup."

"I know."

"Socrates was executed for fighting the system he was born into. He was forced to drink poison. Plato advises that in troubled times, those with extraordinary ideas should lay low and wait for the right opportunity. But one can spend one's entire life in waiting and at that point you might as well be dead. Are you a coward for leaving? I should say not. You were a boy, and you were defending your friend. Are you a coward for staying away, for putting Berk and its problems out of your mind? Yes."

"I needed to leave!" Hiccup said, stung, "I needed to find a place."

Artemisia pursed her lips, deep in thought. "I think one of the greatest lies about growing up is the myth about 'finding a place'. Sheep can join their flocks, but you are something different. People like you cannot simply find a place. You have to make one for yourself."

"Well I found one here, didn't I?"

"Did you? And what about Toothless? What is there for him in Alexandria? Will you have him spend the rest of his days on the library roof while you attend my classes? Will he ever see another dragon?"

"Well I convinced you, and you're a start. I can make a place here for him too."

"Can you?"

"Well my people skills need some work, but I'm good with math, and all the philosophical stuff you've taught. I'm good in the forge. I'd like to think of myself as a problem solver-

"And are the problems of Berk solved?"

"It's not that simple!"

"Isn't it?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Becauseâ€| because I'd be arguing with my dad!"

"And if anyone on that island had the right to do that, it's you."

"So?"

"So if you're the only one who can, and you know it can help, doesn't that give you the moral responsibility to follow through? What use is being down here in Alexandria, learning all that you've learned and knowing all that you know if you will not use it to better the lives of your own people? What use are you if you aren't willing to stand up when it really counts?"

"Even if I stood up, no one would listen! Vikings have stubbornness issues."

"You're bloodline is respected."

"I wasn't!"

"You'd find allies, Hiccup. After three-hundred years of constant fighting, stubborn or not, some people on that island have to be getting tired. They have to be looking for another way."

Hiccup scowled. "Well if they did, they never spoke out."

"Neither did you. You just left. Everyone always remains silent out of fear they'll be the only voice, but think on it. Stubborn old warriors may be set in their ways, but how many mothers are weary of losing their sons? What about the youth of the village, who know they'll be entering a lifetime of war and misery?"

"They're proud to."

"Maybe because they see no other options. Read Cicero's writings on politics. Winning is a matter of demographics."

"My father and his warriors have all the power in the village."

"Warriors often do when a nation is at war. But the moment they are no longer at war, things change. You will not change the minds of those whose lives and power depends on things staying the same. You have to turn to those whose lives will be improved. Do you have a religious leader in Berk?"

"The Goethi. She's the village healer too."

Artemisia smiled. "Then I very much suspect she is tired of looking at blood and burns. Get her on your side as well. It is difficult to argue with gods, or their representatives. Not when you truly believe. Look also to the symbols which Stoick prizes. Look to your ancestors and their stories. If Berk is a nation of tradition, then rewrite history. Weaken Stoick's symbols, and he cannot fight in their name. If you convince the young and the mothers to follow you, then his warriors cannot rightly say they fight for their families. If you use your knowledge of dragons to effectively prevent raids and keep the beasts at bay with far less bloodshed, then you will be doing their jobs better than they do, and they cannot claim their way

is necessary. If you want to sway those on the fence, then speak not of change, but of restoration. It'll confuse the hell out of all of them. It'll muddy their minds and weaken their resolve. Berk is in a poor state. Say you want to return it to the glory of old. Use words like Honor and Glory a lot. The Dragons are merely an accessory. A means to that end. Sweep away the ground upon which Stoick stands and he will fall."

"You make it sound so simple!"

"It is by no means simple, Hiccup. But it is what must happen to fix Berk's problems. And I would expect nothing less from you."

"And what about me and my dad?" he said miserably.

"I don't know!" Artemisia admitted, her voice equally quiet. "My father was a philosopher. Not a Viking Warchief."

"Oh, really?"

"Hiccup!"

"Sorry." He sighed and reached behind him to give Toothless a fond scratch. The dragon curled over and licked his rider's face. Hiccup said, "It's much easier, him thinking I'm dead. I'd prefer that to him thinking I betrayed the village or something!" Artemisia, no one will listen to Hiccup the Useless. Whether they want the war to end or not, I was never respected. I was the village joke. I was awkward and clumsy and I did more harm than good. They'll remember that."

"You'll find a way around that. Or you'll prove them wrong somehow. During the next lesson I'm going to give you some scrolls. Copies of Cicero's works, the writings of the Emperors Julius, Claudius and Augustus Caesar. If you're going to take power, you need to know how to keep it and make good use of it. But I don't want you here in Alexandria another month. Not when you could be in Berk, making the world a better place."

They sat in silence for some time, watching the stars wheel overhead. Sensing his distress, she said, "I shouldn't be that forceful, Hiccup. I'm sorry."

"It's alright." He replied quietly. "I understand."

"It's just that several times throughout our history, the Library and the Museo. The whole Academy has almost fallen." She motioned up at the sky. "I know my quest is up there. What I want to examine, the questions I want to ask, they're all up there. But too often we've devoted our lives to answering all the cosmic questions. Too often we fail to address the more mundane problems of the world we fail to help where we ought to. We let it all pass us by and when our number comes up we aren't prepared. It is our duty not only to unravel the mysteries of the cosmos, but to use that knowledge to help in a real and productive way. We can balance out the insanity of the world. Your friend Shahira is a fisherman's daughter. I know she's frustrated with me and perhaps she's justified; the systems our society runs on ensure that she's not going to make it very far, whether I teach her or not. But here you sit, a Viking Prince. Someone with access to real power. Someone who could make a real

difference."

"I don't want to rule."

"According to Plato's writings, the reluctant make the best rulers." She gave him a smile which he did not return. He was a little too busy trying to quell the anxiety bubbling in his chest.

"Oh, I meant to give you this." Artemisia plunged her hand into her robes. "One second- Ahh. Here it is." She pulled out a golden disc about five inches across. It was etched with intricate patterns. The edge was ruled in degrees, and Hiccup could see the months and the phases of the moon traced out on various rotating inner discs. The entire assembly was beautiful. A work of art as much as a tool of measurement.

"An Astrolabe!" Hiccup recognized the instrument. He had seen them in shops and watched the nobles and the wealthy of Alexandria use them. No instrument in the world could measure the passage of time more accurately. It could also measure angles, predict the phases of the sun and the moon. The instruments were a godsend to farmers, surveyors, navigators, and travelers across the ages. It was a tool which could only be born of civilization.

Artemisia smiled at his enthusiasm. She said, "The tool of a traveler and a philosopher." She placed it in his palm and closed his hand over it. "It was mine. It's yours now. No matter where you are in the world, when you carry this, you carry all of us with you."

* * *

><p>A chill had infected Artemisia's classes. Artemisia treated him as warmly as she always did, but her ultimatum hovered like a shadow over all of their interactions. Before there had been nothing but brightness and optimism and a future full of learning. Now all Hiccup could see in his future was an impending deadline.</p>

Even so, Hiccup was a dutiful student. He read Cicero thoroughly, and found in the politician's letters many lessons to be learned. He spent his off hours thinking of how he could apply them to the situation on Berk. He had read Caesar's war commentaries before, but only as casual escapism. Now he looked to Caesar's masterful tactics in Gaul, and wondered if there was something there he could use. Claudio's generals had done much the same thing in Britain, playing one tribe off against another. Keeping his own troops safe and using the internal politics of the region to weaken alliances and prevent any organized resistance. As chief, Stoick always faced conflicting interests. Perhaps they could be played off against one anotherâ€¦

Hiccup hated thinking like that. He did not want to be at war with his father. He just wanted everyone to get along. There had to be a way to do it without tearing Berk apart, yet the one commonality, the one brutal truth shared between all the political stories Artemisia had given him was that there were winners and losers, and that when one was playing for the highest stakes possible, brutality was commonplace. Not literal violence; Cicero had painted politics as a civilized endeavor. All the same, he had campaigned ruthlessly against his opponents. While they still had their good health, their careers and futures were certainly in shambles after he was done with

them.

In less than a month, Artemisia expected Hiccup to leave Alexandria, to go back to Berk. He dreaded that deadline more than anything else in the world. He knew that no matter what happened, his life as he knew it would end.

Facing off against Stoick the Vast would have one of two results: if Hiccup lost, he would be forever cast out as a traitor. The possibility of one day returning, or of even being respected in memory would vanish and he would forever be forced to confront the fact that his own people hated him. Even worse, they might kill Toothless.

If, through some miracle, Hiccup won, he would be responsible for all of Berk. His wandering days would be done. He would never be able to return to Alexandria and browse its library. He did not feel ready for that either. He just wanted to help. He just wanted to heal. What would his dad think of him? How badly would Stoick resent his son for taking power? Would he fight to keep it? Would the power struggle actually come to blows? These questions and more haunted his waking moments. In his worst nightmares he saw Stoick rushing at him, axe raised, and Toothless stepping in to protect his riderâ€œ! the image made him feel so very sick.

Artemisia had set up a small study for him at her little auditorium. From behind a lattice wall, he watched as she taught her classes. He noted the faces of her students, shining with enthusiasm and hungry for knowledge, just as he had been not so long ago. He envied them. He glanced to Shahira's usual spot near the door. It was empty.

Frowning, Hiccup turned from his scrolls and took a closer look, scanning the crowd for her signature black mane and olive skin. Was that it, then? Had she finally given up on Artemisia's lessons?

He waited patiently as the teacher lead her pupils through a review of the basics of Euclid's geometrical axioms. The class ended a half-hour later and the students filed out, a few staying behind to ask questions. Hiccup rose from his chair and emerged from behind the lattice wall, leaning against it and watching, waiting. A few of his former classmates smiled and nodded. Gestures he returned. One or two looked jealous and envious, but most of them understood that he had been graduated to a different level of learning. That was one thing he loved about the Academy; there was little enmity or politics. Everyone was there to learn as best they could. Faster, or slower, it did not matter. They were all on one team devoted to unlocking the mysteries of the cosmos.

At long last the classroom was empty. Artemisia gathered her paperwork and rolled it, carefully fitting each scroll into her bag.

"Shahira was missing." He said.

She turned and sighed heavily. "I know. She took some time off. I'm a little worried, actually."

His arms uncrossed and he took a step forward. "Worried? Why?"

"She was supposed to be here today. Her father decided to head west. Apparently there's good fishing grounds near the city of Barqah."

"Barqah..." Hiccup's heart sank. Barqah lay around seven hundred miles west of Alexandria. It was a trading port which belonged to the Arab Caliphates. Well outside Byantium's protective circle. To make matters worse, the waters to the north of that city belonged to the Emirate of Crete. No ship traveled without permission of the Saracen Pirates. Those which triedâ€|

And Artemisia had said Shahira was supposed to be back by now. He said, "I've got to go!"

Artemisia nodded in understanding. "Be careful, Hiccup."

He burst out the door into the bright afternoon sun. The Agora was full of traders, proselytizers and wandering citizens. Hiccup ran through the thick crowds as fast as he could, ducking and weaving his way east towards the Library. He took the marble steps two at a time and ran through the open doors. Students and professors weaved their way to and fro between the bookshelves, yelping in surprise as he passed by them, and sometimes throwing up a cloud of scrolls as they fell backwards but he didn't care.

Hiccup cared about Shahira, even though they had not ended on the best of terms. She was a good person, no matter how frustrated she became, and he knew that she deserved far better than whatever the pirates might have done to her.

He found the ladder and scampered up, bursting onto the rooftop. Toothless was there, lying under the canvas sail Hiccup used to shade him from the worst of the sun's heat. He raised his head curiously as his rider approached.

"We gotta go, Bud!" Hiccup said, panting as he shucked his robes and pulled his riding leathers out of a nearby sack. "Shahira is in trouble!"

The dragon's ears perked up, and his pupils widened as Hiccup pulled out the saddle. Toothless grinned a gummy grin and bounded to his feet, quivering with anticipation.

"Yeah, that's right!" Hiccup said, "A daytime ride." The Viking took a moment to check his flight suit. It had several secret surprises in it, including miniature wings. Hiccup had decided a long time ago that he wanted not only to ride Toothless, but to fly beside him as an equal. He had managed it eventually, after several failed â€"and nearly disastrous- attempts. Hiccup couldn't fly, exactly, but he could glide through the clouds beside his best friend, and there was no activity more glorious. Working as quickly as he could, Hiccup checked the stabilizer spring, and made sure his wings were folded properly and tucked away. Toothless was bounding around the rooftop, tongue lolling at the prospect of flying in the daytime. It made Hiccup's heart wrench as he recalled Artemisia's question: What is there for him in Alexandria?

Perhaps going back to Berk was for the best, he thought as he swung his leg over the saddle. As fascinating and enlightening a place as Alexandria was, it was too busy a city for Toothless. It was unfair

to him to be stuck on one roof for half his life. The more Hiccup thought about it, the more guilty he felt. He fixed his safety harness and then paused, patting Toothless' head. "I'm sorry, bud. We'll find a better way to do this, alright? When we get back things'll be different. I promise."

The dragon quirked his head to the side and purred quietly.

"I'm sorry." He said again.

* * *

><p>Hiccup loved this part.</p>

There came a moment in Toothless' acceleration when all of reality would shake. Hiccup had built a small shield he could duck behind. It took the worst of the wind away, but he could still feel himself being sucked backwards. The air around the tips of Toothless' wings would start to condense, leaving trails of white mist which flowed away in long streams behind the dragon. Hiccup lay prone along Toothless' back, trusting his safety harness to keep him held in place. He gripped the saddle's handles and tensed up, fighting against the shaking and clattering which threatened to rip him limb from limb. All the while he could hear the high-pitched whistling which had brought such fear to Berk every raid of his childhood.

Then the white trails at Toothless' wingtips would slowly crawl down the wings, thickening into a sheet of cloud formed through sheer speed. It would flow from everywhere, trailing behind them in a long tail, even forming around Hiccup himself. All the while the shaking and the pressure would increase, as if reality itself was trying to prevent him from going any faster. Hiccup would hold even more tightly against Toothless' back. He'd shut his eyes and let out a long breath as the mist condensed into a white wall. A cone of cloud. A barrier, constructed by the gods to limit their freedom.

And they'd break through it. One final mighty KRAKOOOM would echo across the ocean, as if Odin's staff had just shattered. Then, for Hiccup and Toothless, all sound would cease. The pressures were too much for Hiccup to even lift his head. He was forced to lie there, eyes shut, gulping what air he could from the rushing wind, trusting his helmet, flight suit and harness to absorb the worst of the gods' wrath, and his dragon to carry them through.

When the time came Toothless would slow down. The pressures would lessen and fade. The air would return, and the two best friends would be soaring through the sky, hundreds of miles from where they had started. After he and Toothless broke through that wall, when he changed out of his flight suit, he could always see the patterns of straps and harnesses etched into his skin in purple bruises.

They were floating now, wings spread, riding the easy wind. Far ahead, just on the horizon lay the city of Barqah. Hiccup sat up and looked northeast, where he knew that the island of Crete lay, surrounded by the Saracen pirate fleet.

There existed as many different kinds of fisherman as there did sea-life. Some caught shellfish, others sharks. A variety specialized in the various kinds of fish there were to be found in the

Mediterranean. The Pandevs, however, used nets to scoop up schools of larger groupers which were found at the medium depths: thirty to sixty meters. Lots of good Grouper fishing spots could be found north of Barqah. But anyone without the gold seal of permission from the Caliphate was likely to be burn, bloodied and tossed in for the sharks.

The Saracen fisherman tended to fish in groups where they could watch each other and report any illegal fishing. Hiccup started with the lone ships. The ones which kept their distances from the big fleets. The first few turned out to be Saracen fishing vessels searching for untapped grouper schools. Through his spyglass Hiccup could see their wide nets being dragged behind.

He spotted a lone vessel lurking off to the side, and swooped down below cloud level for a closer look. Light glinted off of armor, and he saw the Saracen colors being flown at the top of the mast. There was a lot of activity onboard the deck of the ship. Hiccup turned in his saddle and watched closely as its captain handed out flurry of orders, waving his arms and pointing north towards two other ships. Both of them had their sails out in full and were on a straight run with the wind. One looked to be pursuing the other. He could see through the lens, the sailors working steadily, trying to catch their prey: two sailors. A man, and a young woman with black hair and olive skin.

"Let's go Toothless." Hiccup urged, stowing his spyglass. He gripped his handles, pressed his feet into the stirrups and pulled up, flipping his dragon over in a tight summersault, clicking his pedal to adjust the false tailfin in tandem with Toothless' movements. They dived towards the ocean, picking up speed as the white-caps grew larger and larger. He leaned to the side and Toothless twirled as they fell, putting him neatly in line with the fleeing fishing vessel.

Hiccup planted his feet and pulled a second time. They were mere meters from the crashing waves when Toothless rose out of his dive. Dragon and rider whistled across the water's surface, water spraying in their wake as they buzzed by the Saracen pirate vessel Hiccup had first spotted. He grinned imagining their shocked expressions.

Up ahead the larger ship had already caught up with the smaller vessel, and Hiccup could see boarders leaping across the narrow gap. The ships were being pulled together with grapples and long boathooks.

"Hit the ropes, bud." Hiccup murmured, knowing Toothless' extraordinary ears would pick up his voice. The Night Fury fired a single shot between the ships, scorching the wood siding and burning through the grapples and boathooks. Several boarders who were about to jump slid to a halt, shocked by the sudden heat. Once again Hiccup leaned in his saddle, twisting Toothless upside down. From a scabbard on his side Hiccup drew his sword — a Roman Gladius which he had custom made during his free time at a forge in Italy. They passed between the boats, and he swung upwards, slicing through the last few ropes holding both boats together. They separated with a mighty splash, and drifted apart.

Once again Hiccup pulled Toothless into a summersault. He unhooked his harness, pulled a lever behind his knee — one which gave fin

control back to Toothless, and then leapt out into the open air. As he fell he pulled the ripcords on each leg and extended his arms, spreading out the leather sails and opening his wingsuit.

On the deck ahead he could see five burly men. Two of them were holding Shahira hostage. The other three were trying to tackle Anton Pandev, but he was keeping them at bay with his own boathook.

Soaring towards them, Hiccup balled himself up and rammed into one of Shahira's captors at full speed. The crash threw all four of them across the deck. The impact rattled his teeth, but he was well acquainted with this sort of landing and recovered first. He pulled out his shield, which had been slung across his back, and brought it down on the head of one stunned pirate, cringing at the horrid cracking sound the impact made. He turned to deal with the other and realized his gladius was sticking out of the man's chest.

Loki's balls! That... had not been planned, but Hiccup had been carrying the sword when he'd jumped.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! He turned to the three other pirates, who were backing away quickly; their quarrel with Anton Pandev forgotten.

Toothless landed behind Hiccup with a heavy thump. The dragon's ears were flattened against his neck, and his wings were spread aggressively. He hissed at them and they yelped, tripping over themselves to get as far from the dragon as possible. Hiccup spared Shahira a glance. The young woman was lying on the deck, propped up on her hands. She looked lost between terror and admiration.

"Keep an eye on them, bud."

The Dragon hissed at the pirates and advanced a few steps, making his intentions perfectly clear, should any of them have decided to move. All three of them froze, letting their weapons fall to the deck. Hiccup took the opportunity to retrieve his sword, trying to block out the ugly noises and the spurts of blood as he tugged his blade out. After he had wiped his blade off on the dead man's clothing, he turned back to his captives.

"Hey guys." Hiccup waved at them as cheerfully as he could manage. "I think now would be a good time to practice your swimming." His statement was punctuated by one of Toothless' signature roars. One of the attackers crossed himself before leaping over the side. The other two didn't wait.

An arrow skipped across the deck, breaking into pieces as it bounced up and over Toothless' head. The attacking ship had recovered. It was coming around again, preparing to board. Shahira scampered away as a flurry of arrows thudded into the wooden planks. Hiccup ran towards the opposite side of the boat, leaping onto Toothless' back and taking flight. They soared up a dozen meters or so performed a tight turn. Toothless spat out two fiery blasts, one burning through the pirate ship's sails, the other hitting their bow and detonating in a blast which threw sailors and splintered boards high into the air. Its sails wrecked, the ship slowed to a crawl immediately. Anton Pandev's fishing vessel surged ahead to a safe distance. Hiccup stood in his stirrups and watched a few seconds to make sure that the ship

was truly disabled. As he did so, he caught the name printed in Latin across the bow: Neptune's Pride.

Hiccup and Toothless weren't done, however. There was still the third ship, the Saracen pirate vessel he had originally spotted. Hiccup leaned into his saddle, pressing down the tailfin peddle. Toothless raced towards their second target, firing three blasts. The first hit the base of their mast, sending their sail and rigging into the crashing waves. The second hit the deck, burning through into their hull and detonating with a muffled thump. The third hit them at the waterline and blew an enormous hole in the side of the vessel, which promptly began to sink.

Hiccup and Toothless turned once again and soared lazily past Neptune's Pride to land on Anton's deck with barely a whisper. Hiccup slid off of Toothless' back and strode over to the fisherman. Anton and his daughter were working vigorously to squeeze as much speed out of the sails as possible. Yet when Hiccup approached he dropped his line and reached for his boathook.

"Oh, no no no!" Hiccup raised his hands to placate the man. "It's alright. It's okay. I'm me!" He grinned at them, and then realized his helmet was still on. He reached up and removed it, giving Shahira an awkward grin.

Her jaw was hanging open. She slowly looked him up and down, taking in his brown and black flightsuit, the floppy wings he had yet to fold up and stow away, and his blood-spattered shield with the Night Fury emblazoned on the center. Her father's gaze was fixed on Toothless, who had begun sniffing around their closed cargo hatch. Hiccup knew his dragon could smell raw fish somewhere nearby, which meant he had to resolve this before Toothless got really annoyed and decided to start digging.

"Hi guys." He tried.

They simply kept staring.

"Soâ€| did you get a good catch today?" Behind him, Toothless' snuffling began to increase in volume, accompanied by the occasional frustrated growl. Neither Shahira nor her father seemed in any state to reply. But their gazes had migrated over to Toothless, who was starting to scratch plaintively at the locked hatch.

"Youâ€|? How..? Whatâ€|? _What is happening?!_" Shahira waved her arms, groping for words.

"I saved your life. You owe me beer."

Toothless growled and smacked Hiccup with his tail.

"-And a bucket of fish I guess."

The tail hit him a second time.

"-Two. Two buckets."

"Buckets of fishâ€| _this _is what those were for? All this time? For your-" she waved an impotent hand. "_What is that thing?_"

"Well you know how I was being all secretive and mysterious?" Hiccup jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. Behind him, Toothless was beginning to growl angrily at the closed hatch.

"Yeahâ€| he's the mystery. Alrightâ€| look. I am sorry about his, but he gets really hungry after long flights. I'll find a way to pay you back." Hiccup kicked the hatch open and backed up, giving Toothless some space. The dragon launched himself into the hole, wriggling back and forth, worming his way into the small cargo hold. He managed to work almost his entire body under the deck. His tail was waving contentedly in the air while under their feet, they could hear him slurping and chewing away.

Anton shook his boathook. "You ride demons, boy?"

"Okay, soâ€| not a demon." Hiccup corrected, "He's actually just a dragon."

"Oh?" Anton asked lightly. "Is that all? Just a dragon?"

"Dragons are mythical beasts, Hiccup!" Shahira said.

Hiccup glanced back at the waving tail and turned to her. "Well at the moment my mythical dragon is eating all of your real fish, so you might want to rethink that premise. And _Beast _is a little harsh, and could you put that boathook down? He may be out of fire, but if he sees you threatening me, he _will_ eat you. I'm pretty sure none of us want that. I meanâ€| unless you do. Which I doubt."

"Hiccupâ€|" Shahira said, struggling to collect herself.

He smiled at her. "Yeah?"

"Get out of here." She ordered.

Now it was his turn to drop his jaw. "What?"

"Get out of here. Take that thing with you."

Hiccup's fists curled with indignation. "I was helping you! You guys were in trouble!"

"We had it handled, boy!" Anton was still hostile, but at least he had put his boathook down.

"Dadâ€|" Shahira murmured, her brow furrowing.

"That was painfully obvious." Hiccup shot back. "I'm sure those guys were boarding just to say Hi. Who were they, anyway? They weren't flying Saracen colors."

"They were other fisherman, after our catch." Anton said. "We've been through worse."

"Uh huh. And you know you're in Caliphate waters, right?"

"Hiccup, we're-" Shahira began, but was cut off by her father. He said, "The waters around Alexandria are empty, and we have to eat. It's a calculated risk."

"Ye-yeah." Sharia agreed sullenly.

The deck shook and thumped as Toothless reappeared, looking satisfied. He was swinging his tail around happily, hitting it on absolutely everything.

"Soo! We can hang around until we're back in Alexandria?" Hiccup asked, ducking under his friend's open wing. "I could escort you back."

"We're fine." Anton said stiffly. "We can do without your beast, myth or not."

Shahira took a step towards Hiccup, but quickly retreated to her father's side the moment Toothless took notice of her. The dragon froze, his eyes were wide with curiosity. He kept glancing from Hiccup to Shahira and back.

"Shahira, it's alright." Hiccup stepped forward and reached for her hand. He spoke gently and calmly. "I know he can look scary, but he's really gentle. Just trust me. I know you were angry with me but now you know the truth. I have nothing more to hide."

She opened her mouth uncertainly, a response forming on the tip of her tongue.

"Shahira!" He father barked sternly. She shut her mouth, shot Anton a stubborn glare, and stepped forward to take Hiccup's hand. Smiling, he pulled her to him. Toothless leaned in to sniff at her, and she tensed as his breath huffed against her cheek, blowing around strands of her hair. The dragon cooed, a high-pitched bubbly noise which made her smile, despite her nervousness.

Hiccup stared down at her, transfixed by the curve of her lips, and the way the sunlight shone against her olive skin. He reached up and brushed his palm across her cheek. As always, that memory of sharp blue eyes and golden locks burned itself across his inner eye, yet he ignored it this time, and discovered that the result was not nearly as dire as he had always thought it would be. That needle in his chest, which he thought would pierce deeper, was suddenly removed. He was just left staring down at Shahira, feeling lightheaded. He had not recognized the weight of the burden he had been carrying all this time and now that it was gone!

"Hiccup-

He kissed her. Gently at first, but he wrapped his other hand around her waist, pulling her in until her half-hearted, muffled objections ceased. Her fingertips slipped up the flight leathers and weaved slowly into his thick auburn hair. Then they curled up, tickling the back of his neck, and pulling him closer. She opened her mouth and ran her tongue gently across his lips, lighting his nerves on fire.

"OI!" Anton's voice cut through the haze.

They parted with a quiet noise, and Shahira leaned back, a blush spreading across her cheeks. Her father was glowering at them.

"Look—" Hiccup began, but she laid a finger across his lips. He could still feel her tongue there. Its absence burned him in the best possible way, and he knew that only more of that contact could soothe this sudden, desperate yearning.

She said, "We're leaving, Hiccup. My father and I are going west."

His heart dropped like a stone. The yearning deepened into a steady, painful ache, sharpened by the eight years of loneliness which had just seconds before glimpsed a possible end.

She took a step back, forcing him to loosen his grip. She said, "I'm sorry."

"The Caliphates control the Mediterranean all the way up into Spain. You'll never make it!" He said, ashamed of how pathetically plaintive his voice sounded. Toothless nuzzled him, sensing his distress.

"We'll follow the north shoreline." Anton said. "There's bound to be safe anchorage in Italy and the Frankish kingdoms. We just have to get past Crete."

"Shahira!" Hiccup said, looking back down at her. She leaned up and kissed him again, a lingering, mournful gesture which soothed the ache for but a moment, and left him feeling worse than before when their lips parted. She stepped backwards until she was once again at her father's shoulder.

"Thank you for the help, Hiccup. But we're going." She said.

"I'll miss you." He replied, the words spilling out awkwardly.

She gave him a smile. "I'll miss you too."

"Here." He unstrapped his short sword and tossed it on the deck. "It's a gladius. The type of sword used by the Roman Legions." He reached over to Toothless' saddle and pulled out a small bag of gold coins, tossing it over to land beside the sword. "This is all I have with me. You might be able to buy off someone or something. I dunno. Maybe sell your ship in Italy and then go across the land. You should be fairly safe in Carolingian territory."

"Thanks." She said shortly.

They stood there for another awkward moment before he mounted Toothless and gave her one last smile.

Shahira smirked back. "That's a good look for you, you know?"

"What is?"

"The tight leather outfit." She gestured. "It's very daring? Soldierly? It just works, okay. It's a good look for you."

They shared one last grin, and then he slipped his helmet back on and patted his dragon's head. "Toothless."

The black wings spread with a leathery _whumph_, and then plunged downward, rocking the small fishing vessel and sending both dragon and rider careening into the air at high speed. Hiccup watched as the vessel, and more importantly the first woman since Astrid Hofferson to captivate him, shrank and disappeared into the murky blue vastness of the Mediterranean.

* * *

><p>Hiccup let out a frustrated yell and lay back on Toothless, keeping his feet even in the stirrups so as not to alter the tailfin. Underneath him he could feel Toothless' uneasy growl. Toothless always grew a little agitated when Hiccup was upset. He rubbed the dragon's flank, trying to soothe him. "It's alright bud. Human problems."</p>

Dusk was falling, and he knew that the ocean below was lit up in brilliant washes of twinkling orange and yellow. The sky above was pink and purple. The moon hung high in the sky, visible in the dusk light. A few stars were peeping out on the western horizon. There was no sound but the gentle wind.

He could still feel her tongue on his lips. That gentle caress had set his blood on fire and he ached to feel it again. The smoothness, the moisture, and the unspoken invitation that came with it. He should have stayedâ€!

But what then? Leave Alexandria? Break his promises to Artemisia? Leave the one place in the world he felt so at home? Give up the library, and his thirst for knowledge? No. He could have stayed with Shahira. But it wasn't what he wanted.

Hiccup hoped she would make it, wherever she and her father were going. He wanted her to be happy. To live a care-free, successful life if that was what she was searching for. If that was not available for her in Alexandria, then he hoped she would find it elsewhere.

Night had fallen when they spotted the Pharos Lighthouse on the horizon, the great beacon of Alexandria. Its comforting light pierced through the darkness, welcoming him home.

They swooped down and circled the rich quarter of Alexandria, searching for Artemisia's courtyard. The city sprawled below them, a web of bright streets teeming with thousands of late-night residents. He could hear the noise, even from a full two kilometers above. It was chilly up there, but he was wearing his hooded riding cloak, transforming himself into a little bundle of warmth. He had worn it many times during their nightly flights. Indeed he had grown so warm and comfortable that he had actually fallen asleep mid-flight, and nearly slipped off of Toothless' back. The dragon knew, but there was no way he would admit that little incident to anyone else alive. Toothless of course could stand the cold just fine. He had been living as a wild dragon in Berk's climate for at least as long as Hiccup was alive.

He leaned forward and they began a shallow, languid descent, slipping gently towards the web of lights until individual torches were visible, and Hiccup could see the faces of the passersby. He knew he and Toothless were safe; anyone who bothered to look up would have

their nightvision destroyed by those torches. No one ever looked up anyway. Hiccup and Toothless skimmed across the rooftops. He recognized Artemisia's outer garden and they landed with hardly a whisper.

"Stay here for a second, bud." Hiccup ordered, slipping off his helmet. He circled around to the front of the house and rapped politely on the door.

As he expected, the panel slid open revealing the face of Lugos, Artemisia's slave. The man had beady eyes, and an austere manner which made him perfect for dealing with unwanted guests. Thankfully, Hiccup Haddock was on Artemisia's shortlist.

"Master Hiccup." Lugos said, staring down his beaked nose at Hiccup. "Welcome." He unlocked the door and opened it a crack to let Hiccup through. "I'm afraid the Mistress is with company at the moment. Martius the Guard Captain is here and they are currently in the midst of a debate." Somewhere behind the servant, Hiccup heard the sound of a smashed glass.

"It is somewhat heated, I fear." Lugos added in a weary tone.

Hiccup brushed past him and headed towards the noise. He could hear Martius roaring. The guardsmen's voice echoed through the halls. "I don't care if it's his day off or not! I want to know _how _he knew these people and I need to know it _right now!"

Artemisia replied. Her voice was softer, and though he couldn't make out the exact words, her stern and reprimanding tone was unmistakable. He reached the wooden door to her study and gave it a tentative knock. It opened a moment later to reveal Artemisia, looking thoroughly exhausted.

"Speak of the devil." She said, standing aside to let him in. He was immediately accosted by Martius, who was looking absolutely furious. The man grabbed him by the collar and threw him roughly into a chair.

"Martius!" Artemisia snapped angrily.

Toothless' head appeared in an open window behind the fuming guardsmen, his green eyes narrowing into hostile slits. Hiccup lowered his hand as discreetly as he could, silently signaling the dragon that he was not in danger. Even so, the dragon kept watching. To Martius, Hiccup said, "You could have just offered me a seat."

"What the hell are you wearing?" Martius was staring down at Hiccup's flightsuit, visible beneath his cloak.

"Myâ€| uniform. From the Varangians.

"Any particular reason why?"

"I felt nostalgic." Hiccup snapped, his patience wearing thin.
"What's it to you?"

"What do you know about the dock shakedowns?" Martius demanded.

"Iâ€| what are you talking about?"

The guard captain planted his hands on his hips. Or rather, one hand landed on his hip, the other landed on the hilt of his sheathed sword; an unmistakable threat. "Last time we met, you told me that my guards were shaking down fishermen. What do you know about it?"

"Iâ€| I was with Shahira Pandev, and her father told me that the guards were collecting extra fees from fishermen who wanted to dock."

"And?"

"And that's it."

Martius glared at him a moment longer, then he softened and stepped back. "Did you know that the fishermen were paying them in Saracen gold?"

"_What?_"

The guardsmen pulled a few coins out of his pocket and tossed them in Hiccup's lap. Broad, thin gold discs, they were indeed inscribed with the names of Caliphs and Governors, all in Arabic Kufic script.

"That'sâ€|. what are you saying?" Hiccup felt his breath coming in short bursts.

Artemisia laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Hiccup, they weren't paying extra fees, they were delivering bribes."

"Noâ€|" that was impossible. There was no way Shahira would be into that. Why would she do that? The young woman's words rang in his ear: Artemisia says it's the most civilized place on the planet but there's nothing here for usâ€|

"Did you ever see any maps getting delivered to Anton Pandev's boat?" Martius asked.

All the while Shahira had been lying to him? "That's impossibleâ€|" Hiccup murmured.

"Hiccup." His teacher tapped him on the shoulder, getting his attention.

"Did you ever see any maps getting delivered to Anton Pandev's boat?" the captain asked again.

"Yeahâ€| yeahâ€|" Hiccup blinked, trying to clear his head. "Ummâ€| some map-maker. His name started with a P. But that's not -"

"Pontius." Martius said. "Owned a shop on Canopic street. We raided it earlier today. Pontius is in prison now for handing out maps detailing Alexandria's defenses. Maps for fishermen like your friends to deliver to the Caliphates."

"No!" Hiccup launched himself to his feet. "He was delivering star charts! This is ridiculous! Artemisiaâ€| you can't believe this! Shahira wouldn't do this!"

"Maybe she wouldn't." the woman said patiently, "But how well did you know her father?"

Little things began to click into place, and Hiccup realized that every question he had asked the Pandevs had been answered by Anton. He also realized what Shahira's strange little pauses had meant.

She had knownâ€| That kissâ€| was just misdirection! She hadn't wanted to say goodbye, she was just distracting him!

"I'm sorry, Hiccup." Artemisia looked just as torn up by the revelation as Hiccup felt.

"Kidâ€|" Martius laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, but Hiccup shook him off. "I gotta go!"

"Where?"

"I have to talk to her." Hiccup growled angrily.

"Yeah? And how are you going to get out there, kid? Hire a boat?"

"Maybe."

"I already sent one to catch them: Neptune's Pride."

Hiccup froze. "Neptune's Prideâ€|" he parroted slowly, remembering the name inscribed on the prow of the attacking vessel. Sickness overtook him, and the room began to spin. He turned around and planted both palms on the nearest table, leaning over and shutting his eyes against the sudden attacks of nausea and vertigo. He had killed two of their sailors, and left them stranded in Caliphate watersâ€|

Hiccup had helped the enemy.

He barely heard Martius' grim voice. "It gets worse. The fact that my men are being bribed with Muslim gold means more than just a betrayal. Especially not when they're being bribed in concert with the maps. You don't accept a payment like that unless you expect you can use it soon."

"War is coming to Alexandria." Artemisia explained, her voice weak. "And without its guard, the city has no defense."

* * *

><p>See? Stuff was happening behind the scenes. Now things finally pick up steam.

Google Astrolabe. Those things are pretty damned cool! They were like the I-Pods of the ancient world.

**Cicero was one of Rome's greatest politicians, and one of the most

influential Orators of all time. And of course you've all heard of Julius Caesar.**

19. Chapter 19

Who here remembers the plotline about how Astrid stole one of Hiccup's sketches? If not, take a read through chapter 11, and chapter 13, because here's the payoff.

* * *

><p>Prodigal Son 19</p>

The Great hall was full of Vikings. The weather outside was cold and miserable. It was washday and most of the clans had gathered indoors while their clothes dried. Stoick was at his throne near the enormous fireplace. Most of the Jorgenson clan and their allies were gathered there as well. Other clans were in other parts of the hall. Brunhilda Hofferson was sitting at a table in the far corner, with a few friends gathered around her. She passed her time talking to them, and occasionally shooting Stoick a cold glare.

"I can't believe he just slammed the door!" Brenna said sympathetically.

"I can't believe he even implied that Astrid would steal anything." Brunhilda replied. "My daughter was a warrior, and an honest woman!"

Her three drinking companions nodded. After washday they always convened at the hall for a mug or two of mead.

"You didn't stay and argue?" Brenna asked. She was a married woman, Matron of the Barrason clan, and in very much the same position as Brunhilda. Brenna had several children, including a younger son in Astrid's class, and an older son already serving as a warrior in Berk's defense. She said, "If the dragons killed my son Bard, and Stoick accused him of something like that I would have been at his door day and night."

"I would have, but I just feltâ€¢!"

"Tired." Tofa Sigurdson finished kindly. She had lost her husband Snorri in the last raid. He had left the village to help young students trapped in the Kill Ring. His corpse had been recovered the following morning, riddled with Nadder spines. Tofa said, "But let's have some sympathy for Stoick. He's already felt your loss twice. Valka and little Hiccup were both taken by the Beasts."

"That's the other reason." Brunhilda said.

"It's a poor one." Ingrid shot back. "Brunhilda's wounds are fresher. And whatever they might be, a Chief's personal feelings shouldn't affect how he treats his people!"

"I have to wonder how much his feelings direct his choices." Brenna said. "Was going after the nest _again _the right move? And just hours after we were raided. What exactly was the point?"

"The point was to show the beasts that they cannot raid us with impunity. If they fly over here and attack us, burn our homes, kill our warriors and steal our livestock, we'll respond in kind!" Tofa said forcefully.

Brunhilda cleared her throat. "The trouble is that they can. What lesson did that raid teach the dragons, exactly? They burned three of our ships and killed half of the expedition, including my daughter. We didn't even get close to their home. What message did we actually send them?"

"That we aren't going to take this aggression lying down. If they attack us, we'll strike back with everything we have. Whether we win or not."

"And promptly lose it all." Ingrid said.

"We didn't lose it all. Ships are replaceable."

Brunhilda set her mug down with a loud clunk. She glared at Tofa. "My daughter wasn't replaceable!"

"Neither was my husband!" Tofa shot back evenly. "I was at Uppsala too, Brunhilda. Astrid swore an oath to protect Berk. You were proud of her for it, as I recall."

Brunhilda glared at her.

"Astrid didn't die protecting Berk, though." Ingrid said. "That voyage was a fool's errand! Young men always have something to prove, but a village chief should be more prudent."

"Stoick is doing what he thinks is best. He's guided us this far!" Tofa defended.

Brunhilda studied the chieftain's profile. The old bear was leaning on one arm of his chair, his chin in his hand as he rubbed his massive beard. His brother Spitelout was beside him, chattering away and gulping down mead. Stoick's gaze was fixed upon the bright, flickering flames. He was scowling harshly at some unwelcome thought. He blinked, looked up and met her eyes from across the hall.

"And where exactly has he guided us to?" Ingrid was asking. "A smart leader wouldn't throw away half of his army in some fruitless attempt to teach the dragons a lesson. Especially on an expedition that's never succeeded in the past."

"Just because it never has doesn't mean it never will." Tofa said.

"I think we both know that was badly planned, though." Brenna said fairly. "We didn't think it through, we just packed up and sailed off."

"We have to defend our home!"

"That wasn't defense, it was an attack!" Ingrid said fiercely. "Besides, what good has defending this island done us?"

"What good? This is our home!"

"Remember after Sluglout died?"

The table went silent.

"You can't seriously be bringing that up again." Tofa said, her face grim. "We've lived here for three-hundred years! Old Hamish and his son both fought long and hard to take this island from the Berserkers! We've earned this place!"

"Who's going to train the new warriors?"

"Snotlout is doing an excellent job, or so his father tells me."

"He's just training more young men to die." Brenna said. "This is a vast archipelago. There are other islands farther from the nest. I'm sure we could find another place to live."

"And give up on our heritage?"

"To insure our future? We might have to!"

"Don't let any of the Jorgensons hear you say that." Tofa recommended. "That group couldn't be pried off this island if Thor himself were pulling."

Brenna turned to Brunhilda, whose eyes were still fixed on Stoick. "What do you think?"

She said, "I think I just want my daughter back."

The enormous doors to the Great Hall swung open, their ancient hinges creaking loudly, silencing the room. A proud figure stepped through, dressed in a ragged, torn tunic and ripped brown leggings. Blonde hair billowed loosely as cold wind rushed into the hall, causing all the Vikings to shiver. She carried a familiar double-headed axe, and a shield bearing the Hofferson crest was slung across her back.

Brunhilda slowly rose to her feet, caught between hope and disbelief.

It couldn't be!

"Astrid?" Brunhilda called out into the silence. Every eye was fixed on the tattered apparition. Several people around the great hall rose with her, looking stunned.

The newcomer turned her head, and Brunhilda met her daughter's eyes, as strong and unyielding as ever. Astrid shot her mother a cocky smirk, and then scanned the enormous room, her electric gaze beaming out between tangled locks of blonde hair. She strode forward, limping slightly, but the silent crowd parted as she passed.

Brunhilda felt Brenna's hand on her shoulder. Her knees were weak with relief, and she fell back to the bench, letting out a long breath. Her companions were giving her looks of astonishment, and perhaps a little fear, but Brunhilda kept her eyes fixed upon her wayward daughter.

Astrid walked straight up to the large central table, straight across the fire from Stoick and his war council. She gave her axe a fancy twirl and planted it in the table with a dull thud, which nevertheless echoed through the hall.

Snotlout, who was standing a few spaces to Stoick's left, went pale.
"Dâ€|dâ€|Draugr!"

Astrid's reply rang crisp and clear, carrying across the crowd and raising a few smiles. "Snotlout, you are an idiot every day of the week. Why can't you take just one day off?" She addressed Stoick. "Reporting for duty, sir."

Every Viking who wasn't staring in shock, turned to Stoick. The chief remained silent, propped up on an elbow. He simply watched her, eyes glinting beneath thick, tensed auburn brows. The corners of his eyes crinkled as he took in Astrid's wrinkled tunic and wild hair. Brunhilda thought her heart would burst with pride as her daughter met his gaze with the same proud intensity she had always displayed.

"Well, well, wellâ€|" Stoick said over the sound of the crackling fire, "The thief returns."

* * *

><p>Astrid felt a strange numbness wash over her as she stood before Stoick's throne. Stormfly was hidden safely in the Cove, where Hiccup had trained his dragon. Astrid had flown on dragonback for perhaps four hours with absolutely nothing to look at but blue sky, blue ocean, and the occasional cloud to break the monotony. Her ass ached, as did her groin, her legs and her back. Astrid was in excellent shape, but riding had taken muscles she didn't know she had, and everything hurt. To add to the pain, her legs were still cramping up. Thankfully the tingling numbness in her palms had dissipated.</p>

And now thisâ€|

The Chieftain's accusation had stabbed straight through her heart, filling her with dread and guilt. The sudden cacophony of voices were drowned out with a strange rushing noise. The hall was suddenly a whirlwind of activity. Cries of outrage mingled with cries of condemnation. Every Viking was on his feet. Clans were grouping together, sorting themselves according to the island's various alliances. All the while, Astrid stared across the bonfire into Stoick's merciless eyes.

This wasn't what she had expected to return to. What had happened? Feeling lost, she searched the hall for Fishlegs and spotted him lingering near one of the pillars. He met her eyes and shrugged. His face was pale, and he looked as if he had just been hit by a charging Gronckle. He clearly hadn't expected the accusation any more than Astrid had.

One enraged voice rose above the din, cutting through Astrid's bewildered daze. Brunhilda stepped out of the crowd, her face white with fury. "Stoick the Vast this is a grievous insult! I swear on my father's name that if you accuse my daughter of theft, you'd better be prepared to face the full might of the Hofferson clan!"

Stoick's angry glare fell upon the older woman. "Your daughter stole one of my son's sketches from my home!"

"How dare you!"

"Mumâ€|" Astrid said quietly, unwilling to watch her mother defend her honor and her reputation. Stoick was right. No matter how he knew, no matter what it meant, Astrid had stolen from him. There was no honor to defend. The room had gone silent again, with everyone watching them. Astrid spotted the faces of her children; the trainees. They were dotted throughout the crowd, anxiously watching the proceedings. Astrid felt a blush spread up her cheeks. She had to look away from them, unable to face the shame.

"Chief or not, Stoick, we'll declare a feud!"

Astrid licked her dry lips. Her voice cracked as she struggled to speak up. "Mumâ€|"

"Do you want this island to be at war, Stoick?" Brunhilda cried. "I'd expect you to know better than to accuse Astrid Hofferson of something like that!"

"Mumâ€|"

"She has been nothing but loyal to you! She's always supported your decisions! She even agreed to go sailing off on some foolhardy quest to find the Dragon's Nest and now you're going to accuse her of this? How dare you even think that way about her! HOW DARE YOU?!"

Behind Brunhilda, the crowd was beginning to murmur in agreement. Astrid could see them, shifting over. The Hofferson clan, three-dozen in total stood gathered together behind their matron. Astrid's father, Haldor Hofferson, was there as well. Their clan's allies stood with them, the Barrasons, the Ingermans, the Finnasons and the Hallkelson. Some of the most powerful tribes on the island. On the other side stood the Jorgenson clan and its allies; the Thorstons, Oddgeirsons, Saemingrsons, the Hallasons and the Karsons. The island was dividing before their very eyes. Fishlegs was standing off to the side, watching Astrid with a slight frown on his face.

"Mum!" Astrid barked.

Brunhilda finally turned to look at her daughter, and the shame in Astrid's eyes told her all she needed to know. They stared at each other until the weight of Astrid's guilt forced her gaze to the floor.

Brunhilda stepped back, out of breath and out of steam. "Ohâ€| Astridâ€|"

Astrid addressed the room at large. "I did it. I stole a sketch from Stoick's home."

The room came alive with whispers and surprised exclamations.

Stoick's eyes widened, but he kept his surprise restrained; he clearly had not expected a blunt admission. He leaned to Spitelout

and said, "Gather the rest of Berk together. I want this grievance resolved today. See that she stays here!"

Two Jorgenson warriors broke from their pack and came to Astrid's sides, laying grim hands upon the hilts of their swords. One retrieved her axe, and the other took her shield. The rest of the family and its allies left the hall to gather everyone up. Stoick left for his home as well, shooting Astrid another cold look as he passed by.

The very second he was gone, Brunhilda bulled her way past Astrid's protesting guards, and threw her arms around her daughter. She pulled Astrid to her breast and sighed a long relieved sigh. "I thought we'd lost you! I thought the dragons had taken you from us!"

The stress and pains were taking their toll, and she let herself slump into her mother's embrace, all the relief of being home had dissipated, and now there was just pain, hunger, and worry.

"Astrid, why did you steal that sketch?"

"How did he know, mum?"

Brunhilda backed up and held her daughter at arm's length, giving her a worried examination. "I gave it back to him. It was obviously drawn by Hiccup, and it was a beautiful sketch. I didn't think you ever would have stolen it. Why would you do that?"

Astrid glance to Fishlegs, who was seated on his own at a shadowy bench, popping berries into his mouth at high speed, and frowning into space, deep in thought.

"It's complicated, mum." Astrid said.

"You're going to have to do better than that, darling." Brunhilda said in frustration. "Stoick's called all of Berk together for a trial."

"I'm hungry." Astrid kept her eyes fixed on the floor. She could feel the gazes of a hundred curious Berkians on her.

Her mother sighed. "Alright, come with me." She led her over to a bench in the corner, where Ingrid Ingeman and Brenna Barrason, two of Brunhilda's friends, were waiting with warm, welcoming smiles on their faces.

"Good to see you back, Astrid." Brenna said. Astrid felt a rush of gratitude for the woman's immediate warmth.

"You probably have an incredible story to tell!" Ingrid Ingeman added.

"You don't know the half of it." Astrid replied, sliding in beside her. Brunhilda took a seat on her other side, keeping a comforting arm around her daughter's shoulder.

To Astrid's surprise, Iona Sigurdson, the Hall's cook, arrived with a bowl of stew and a wooden spoon. She set them down carefully on the table and stepped back, giving Astrid a guarded look. She was one of the few people on the island Astrid spoke to regularly. They talked

every day, when Astrid ran the children up to the Hall for a meal. It was a relief to see her. She said, "You looked hungry."

Astrid stared down at the stew, the sight and scent of a substantial meal momentarily overwhelming her senses. She looked up gratefully. "Iona!"

"Shh! I shouldn't talk to you." The cook said hurriedly. "My husband's right over there, and you're mum nearly declared a feud between our clans."

"And we'll carry through on it, too." Brunhilda announced. "I'm not about to let Astrid suffer for this. It's ridiculous. I just got her back."

"I did steal, mum." Astrid said fiercely, her face red. "I'll take whatever punishment they throw at me. Run the gauntlet, carry hot stones. Whatever honor demands."

"Besides, Iona you're not a Jorgenson." Brenna Barrason said, a shade coldly. "The Feud wouldn't be with you."

"My Husband is Styr Sigurdson. Our clan are allied with the Jorgensons." The cook cringed uncomfortably, wiped her hands on her apron and bustled off leaving Astrid in the company of her mother and her friends. The two guards took up station nearby, keeping an eye on her.

"You just ignore her, girl." Ingrid advised in a tone of false cheer, "She's just being cautious."

Astrid chose to remain silent as she dug into her meal.

* * *

><p>The entire Hooligan tribe was gathered now in a wide, formal circle. The Hoffersons stood on one side of the hall, their friends and allied clans gathered around them. On the opposite side was the Jorgenson clan and its allies. The mood was tense. Brunhilda's threat was clearly something her husband and family were willing to carry out. The Ingermans were right beside them, though Fishlegs was standing exactly half way along the circle, half way between the two factions. Ruffnut was with him, nursing their little girl. It was a symbolic gesture of impartiality. Fishlegs had not even looked at Astrid since her arrival, and she was growing more and more furious, remembering his promise:</p>

We were always in it together, Astrid. I swear on Thor's Hammer!

She had stolen Hiccup's notes and journal at his behest, and only two things kept her from calling him out. The first was that while Fishlegs had encouraged her to take the journal, the actual sketch she had taken of her own accord. The second was that she had lost Hiccup's journal. Fishlegs had the only remaining copy, and if he were punished as well, it would make changing the island's minds about the dragons all the more difficult. There was something larger at stake there.

It occurred to her that perhaps this was why he chose not to support

her; so that he would encounter less troubles later. It was a cold, calculating, horrible thought. But it made sense.

Astrid and Stoick both stood exposed in the circle's center, facing each other, and each standing before their respective factions.

Spitelout Jorgenson was seated on a chair before Stoick's empty throne, and he was waving at the crowd. "Alright, let's have some silence here! You all know me. Chief Stoick is the injured party, so he can't officiate this trial as he normally does. I'm acting in his stead to ensure that the trial is fair."

A few members of the Hofferson clan scoffed. On the other side of the circle, the Jorgensons glared at them.

"Chieftain Stoick Haddock," Spitelout called out. "You have an accusation to make."

"I do." Stoick held a piece of rolled parchment in the air. "This belonged to my son Hiccup Haddock. I know it did because it was hanging on his wall when the demons took him from me. When I got back from the latest raid, it was returned to me by Brunhilda Hofferson."

All eyes turned to Astrid's mother.

"Brunhilda, is this true?" Spitelout asked.

"I returned a sketch." The woman said through gritted teeth. A murmur spread through the Jorgenson's allies.

Stoick continued. "I was under the impression that Astrid Hofferson had died in battle. I would have let this matter rest, except that she's clearly alive and well. On behalf of my son, and as the injured party, I demand that she face the consequences of her actions."

"I see." Spitelout turned to Astrid. "Astrid Hofferson, you've been accused to stealing a sketch from Stoick's household. Do you deny it?"

"No."

"So you did in fact steal the sketch?"

She gritted her teeth, keeping her eyes fixed on Stoick. She had betrayed him. Stolen from him. The least she could do was look him in the eye and admit it. That was also an easier option than looking at her own family, and facing the fact that she had stained the Hofferson name.

That last realization made her flinch. Since when had she taken the easy way? Astrid Hofferson was not a coward! She looked backwards at her own clan, letting their disappointment, frustration and confusion wash over her. She said, "I stole that sketch the night of the dragon raid."

Another murmur spread through the crowd, and Astrid made sure to hear it. There was a reason the trials were held in public; the community shaming was part of the penance, and Astrid refused to shy away from

it. The Hoffersons and their allies were looking sorrowful and frustrated. Brunhilda herself had a stricken look. There was shame in her expression, but also curiosity and sympathy and more love than Astrid felt she deserved.

Across the circle, the Jorgensons were prideful, arrogant and smug. The thief had been caught. Stoick, their chieftain had been wronged and now proper punishment would be exacted upon the criminal. Astrid had not denied the charges, so her guilt was not in question. She would avoid suffering through an Ordeal to let the gods to determine her guilt. There would only be the punishment.

"Why did you steal the sketch?"

Astrid raised her head proudly and jutted out her chin, staring directly into Stoick's unforgiving eyes. She kept her mouth closed, and her gaze fixed on her chief.

"Why did you steal it?" Spitelout asked again.

Astrid kept her silence.

"Astrid, you have a chance to defend yourself. Will you speak?"

Silence. The crowd watched her, transfixed. The judge sighed. "If you insist. Astrid Hofferson, you've admitted you stole the sketch, you won't provide a reason why and without one, you can hardly defend your actions. We have no choice but to move on with the punishment."

There were several punishments for theft. Perhaps Astrid would be forced to run a gauntlet. The village would form two lines, and she would run between them, all the while being pelted by whatever objects the villagers felt was just, whether rocks, or feathers, or rotten fruit. The weight of her crime would be decided by the village.

The trouble was, anyone who threw soft objects would not only be making a statement about the severity of her crime, but would simultaneously be declaring the extent of their loyalty to Stoick. Any clan who wanted to be favored by their Chief, would throw heavy objects, and throw them hard.

Another possible crime was picking hot stones out of boiling water. This crime, while in its own way far more fair than the gauntlet, was more horrifying to Astrid. Dodging projectiles was something she was good at. It was part of being a warrior, as was the risk of injury. Deliberately lowering her hands into boiling water was a different kind of pain, and a different kind of horror.

"Chief Stoick, as the injured party, what do you believe Astrid's punishment should be?"

Astrid watched as her Chief mulled the question over. Boiling water, or running the gauntlet. She found herself praying for the gauntlet.

"Exile." Stoick declared in a low voice which brooked no argument.

The crowd gasped, and Astrid felt a cold hand grip her heart. Her stomach fell, just the way it had when she was in freefall, but this time there was no Stormfly to catch her. Her mouth fell open into a little 'O'. The children protested first, and Astrid dared not look at them. The Jorgensons made no moves at all, though a few of them looked surprised by the verdict. The Hoffersons were shouting and hollering in dismay, Brunhilda among them, paled-faced and speaking to her husband in a fast, clipped tone.

Astrid caught Stoick's eye. Feeling as though her breath was stolen, she barely managed the whisper: "What?"

"You stole from me, lass." Stoick said bluntly. You stole from your chief. If it were another member of the tribe, maybe we'd be lenient. But how am I supposed to trust you in battle? Or teaching the children? Where on Berk is there room for someone with no loyalty."

"But—"

"And beyond that, you stole Hiccup's sketch! You stole all I have left of my son! How dare you?"

Another voice rang out above the clamor. "Yeh can't do this, Stoick!" That was Gobber, elbowing his way past the Thorston clan. "We all know the proper punishment for theft is to run the gauntlet! Yeh can't exile the girl for tha'! Tha's not the law!"

The room went silent again. It had been a very long time since Gobber and Stoick had even spoken to one another in public. The smith kept himself to himself, especially after young Sluglout's death. Watching the two former friends glare at each other was like watching the clock turn back eight years.

Stoick looked furious. "We damned well can! She took Hiccup's sketch! You of all people should understand, Gobber!"

The smith planted his hands on his hips and glared at his chief. "Well I don't. Would ya mind explainin' why yer breakin' our traditions? I reckon yer too close ta this, Stoick! Let someone else judge!"

"You're saying I can't be fair?" Spitelout rose to his feet, glaring at the village smith.

"Yer his cousin fer Thor's sake! This is ridiculous. We all know the girl ain't outcast material! It's Astrid Hofferson!" The Hoffersons murmured in agreement, as did most of the other tribes in the room. Only the Jorgensons and their closest allies showed no signs of discomfort with the idea.

"Can I just cut in for a moment?" Fishlegs strode to the front of the angry crowd. He was large enough that no one dared get in his way. He waved his arms to get everyone's attention. Death glares were still being shot back and forth across the aisle. Both sides looked ready to grab their weapons. "Look I think we're all a little highly strung." he chuckled, a strange noise in the hostile atmosphere. "But umâ€œ! I just wanted to ask a few questions."

"Speak, Fishlegs!" Stoick barked. Gobber stepped aside to give him the floor.

"Our Illustrious Chief aside, who here is the best Dragon Killer on Berk?"

The Jorgenson clan all pointed to Snotlout, who puffed out his chest. The rest of the room, however grudgingly, looked to Astrid. Her own gaze was fixed on Fishlegs. Was he finally stepping up on his own? How much would he admit to? Would he reveal the journal? She hoped not. It would tear Berk to shreds there and then. Blood would likely be spilled. So what was his game plan? What good could he do?

"Aside from Stoick, Astrid Hofferson is the best dragon killer on the island." Fishlegs confirmed as he started to pace back and forth across the semi-circle

"_What?_" Snotlout cried, "You've got to be kidding!"

"Her rate of kills per raid is forty-two percent higher than the next leading warrior. She trains every day from dawn till dusk, and teaches the young ones how to fight Dragons so that Berk's future will be protected. Can anyone deny this?"

Heads shook, some more reluctantly than others. Fishlegs turned to Stoick. "Chief, is this not true? Astrid trains hard, and teaches in the Kill Ring."

"Both are true. They make her betrayal all the worse."

"If it was betrayal at all."

The comment was made lightly, and with such ease that it took many in that powder keg of a crowd a few seconds to sort through it and register what he meant. When they did, a low whisper, angry and confused, stole through the crowd. Stoick leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "She stole from me. What exactly would you call it, Ingerman?"

Fishlegs gulped and took a step back, but managed to rally. "I'm just sayingâ€ The Haddock clan is by far the wealthiest on Berk. You have gold, silver and precious gems. You have chain mail and plate mail. The finest weapons and armor our smithy can provideâ€ all of these and more are in your home. Yet Astrid Hofferson took a sketch."

"One of Hiccup's sketches. A keepsake from my dead son!"

"What was it a sketch of, exactly?"

Berk's chieftain launched himself forward, his hand closing around the hilt of his axe. In his eyes shone with the cold wrath of a Jotun. "I think you'd better sit down, boy."

Fishlegs took a step back, visibly nervous despite his size.

Brunhilda answered for him, speaking loudly and clearly. "I saw it. It was a sketch of Astrid, back when she was a teenager."

A murmur spread through the crowd, and Fishlegs recovered, bolstered

by the hall's sudden curiosity. He said, "Where is the document sir? If we're going to vote her into exile then at the very least we should be able to see what it was she stole!"

Stoick glared, but too many in the crowd were with Fishlegs. He nodded to Spitelout, who was standing at his shoulder, and the Viking produced a thick scroll, rolled up. Fishlegs took it with the utmost care and unrolled it, holding the image up for all to see.

Young Astrid Hofferson, axe at the ready, her image wreathed in a heart-shaped laurel. And underneath the words: The Most Beautiful Girl in Midgard.

The crowd uttered a collective 'Awww'.

As he spoke, Fishlegs held up the scroll, turning it from side to side, so that everyone could see it. He spoke clearly and loudly. "Eight years ago, Berk's heir, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, vanished. I remember that day well. It was the eve of our graduation from Dragon Training in the Kill Ring. The two best warriors in our class were Hiccup Haddock, and Astrid Hofferson." He waved a gracious hand in her direction. The children of Astrid's dragon training class were all listening with rapt attention, all intensely curious about their teacher's personal history. It was something Astrid had never discussed with them.

Fishlegs continued. "Hiccup came in first, Astrid Hofferson came in second. Hiccup was a quiet lad, and after every class he would steal away into the woods for some time alone. As would Astrid Hofferson."

"I was training."

"I'm sure you were. I'm sure he was too." Fishlegs smiled sympathetically, and never in her life had Astrid wanted to punch him harder. He tapped the sketch, "Probably together. Probably fairly often."

Astrid's jaw dropped again as she realized where this was heading. She growled. "Fishlegs, don't you dare!"

"Dare what, Hofferson?" he asked. "There's no need to be ashamed. Hiccup may have been small, but he was a smart young man with a bright future ahead of him. It's been eight years. Hasn't enough time passed for you to admit it out loud?" he returned her glare with another infuriatingly gentle smile. Then he addressed the crowd again. "Hiccup Haddock was taken by a dragon. He never returned from the forest that particular evening, though Astrid did, looking quite frustrated, I might add."

That was true. Astrid had spent that entire day after class trying to follow Hiccup and learn his secrets. She was the first Berkian to realize that something was wrong when she couldn't find him. His tracks just seemed to end somewhere just off Raven Point

"Frustrated by what, is the question my friends?" Fishlegs said gently, addressing the crowd at large. "Coming second in dragon training? Perhaps. Or perhaps a missed rendezvous?"

"Get to the point!" Spitelout barked. Stoick was gazing at Astrid, his eyes wide, and -to her amazement- devoid of all hostility. Instead there wasâ€œ empathy? Surprise? Relief? Gentleness? He had, of course, picked up on Fishleg's insinuations, and wore the look of a man released from a dreadful burden.

"Astrid trains harder than anyone else. She always has. My question is why? Eight years ago she ended the life of a Monstrous Nightmare in one of the most exciting and tense graduations in Berk's three-hundred-year history. Since then she has trained constantly. Worked her hardest to insure that what happened to Berk's lost heir would never happen to anyone else. My question is why? She's refused marriage proposals from the family of every suitor on Berk including my own. My question is why? Astrid has always remained fiercely loyal to Chief Stoick, and the Haddock line, as much as any Jorgenson. My question is why?" He shook the sketch once again. "My friends, I think after all these years, I finally have my answer."

The crowd had calmed. All around the circle, from Hoffersons and Jorgensons alike, were sharing looks of sympathy. Their quarrel was forgotten in light of the revelation. Vikings were a passionate people. Passionately angry, passionately vengeful, but also passionately caring and sympathetic. Nothing like the tragic tale of a budding romance cut short for changing hearts and minds. Whispers of 'I always wonderedâ€œ!', 'oh, the poor dear!', 'I knew it!' and 'Can't exile her. Wouldn't be right.' Spread like wildfire.

"Astrid, I know you don't want to talk about this." Fishlegs said. "And I'm sorry this has been revealed in such a public way. I understand if you're angry at me, but I believe in Justice, as our chief does. We both know you shouldn't be exiled. Not for this."

And Astrid? Wellâ€œ! Astrid was livid. This was an insult. A betrayal of her Uncle Finn, and everything he had taught her. But she knew that if she spoke the truth, if she contradicted Fishlegs and the new, sickeningly poignant lie of a narrative he had painted, she would be exiled. No one would come to her defense. She had no reason of her own to rival it. Why had she actually stolen the sketch? Because she had only just grown to appreciate Hiccup's incredible talents. Because she had just learned the truth about Toothless, and Hiccup's relationship with the dragons. Because she wanted to feel some personal connection to a vivid and underappreciated personality whom she had staunchly ignored during their time together.

Because it was a really good sketch, and captured a moment in her own past. A time she was proud of.

None of those reasons could hold a candle to Fishlegs' version. One of them was an ironically hollow echo, and another would tear the island apart. None of them would sway the crowd, and capture imaginations the way Fishlegs' reasons had.

Astrid realized that the crowd was staring at her, waiting for her to respond to the new narrative. She took a deep breath, feeling the deep blush which had spread across her face as she tried to sort through the tempest of emotions. Astrid made up her mind to ignore Fishlegs' lie entirely, and stick with the two truths she knew. She strode over to the Jorgenson guard who was carrying her shield. As she walked, she passed by Fishlegs and snatched the scroll from his unresisting hands, refusing to even look at him. She could feel the

scrutinizing eyes of Berk upon her as she tore her shield from the Jorgenson warrior. She slipped her hand through the grips, taking comfort in its familiar weight. Then she turned to her chief.

"I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have taken it." She said hoarsely, surprised by how shaky and frail her voice sounded. She thrust the scroll at Stoick, who clasped it gently and carefully, relieving her of the burden. Astrid went down on one knee before her chief, and held up her shield, presenting it to him. "This was always yours, sir."

"Stand up, Astrid." Stoick said, speaking quietly, as he would to a young foal. He set aside the scroll and grasped her elbows, guiding her gently to her feet. He smiled sadly, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a comforting, fatherly way. "I don't think that shield was ever mineâ€¦ but perhaps it should have been my son's. You owe no one an apology for anything. But I certainly owe you one."

The crowd applauded quietly. Astrid stared at the floor, biting her lip. Stoick laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I know when I'm wrong, Astrid. I'm sorry. I should have thought better of you."

* * *

><p>The walk back to Hofferson Hall was silent. Astrid stared staunchly at the ground ahead of her, ignoring the village to the best of her ability. Stoick's declaration of exile had shocked her but she realized it shouldn't have. The Chief had always been extreme when defending that which he valued.</p>

She had escaped from one horrible life, only to be thrust into another. This was a nightmare. It had to be. Perhaps when she woke up in the morning, this would all have been a dream. Berk would be cleaning up after the latest raid. Stoick wouldn't be planning a voyage to the nest. There would be no journal, no shipwreck, no tamed Nadder waiting for her in the Cove at Raven Point. Just like the way it was before. The way it had been for eight years.

She realized that tomorrow, she was going to have to pick up her recruits and bring them back to the arena. She would train them to kill dragons. And afterwards she would bring a basket of fish to Stormfly, and perhaps she and the dragon would go for a flight around the island.

What would the children say about her? What questions would they ask? Would she have to explain what had happened to Hiccup? Would she have to weep and cry, make claims about the things she and Hiccup used to do? How they used to feel about one another? Lies upon lies upon lies, all to protect the most dangerous secret in their island's history. And to protect Stormfly.

Gods above! That was another layer of complexity. And she couldn't involve Fishlegs. Not until she'd spoken to him. Not until she had broken his nose. He had saved her, it was true, but only by painting her as a pathetic weeping maiden, wrought by grief. Astrid Hofferson was a warrior first. Her motivation was simple: Honor her uncle and protect Berk to the very best of her ability. To save her, Fishlegs had destroyed that. He had corrupted her image. This would be neither forgiven, nor forgotten.

The Hall was silent, cold and dark. The fire had gone out in Brunhilda's absence. Washing lines covered in drying clothing were strung up all around the property. Astrid brushed past them and flung the door open. Her mother followed her in. the rest of the clan had followed some distance behind. Astrid had pretended not to hear the shocked whispers of her siblings and cousins. She pretended that their curious stares weren't making her fists itch.

Her mother bade the family wait outside. Astrid was already at her bedside, hanging her axe and her shield on the same hooks they'd always occupied. Working in apathetic movements, she pulled off her tunic, and slid off her pants. She unwound her breast wraps and slipped off her underpants, piling all the clothing beside her bed to be dealt with after a long, deep sleep.

"Astrid?" Brunhilda was tossing a few small sticks in the fire, preparing fuel for the coals she intended to coax back to flame.

Astrid ignored her, electing instead to hunt for new underclothes.

"I'm going to prepare some tea for you."

"Thanks." The younger Viking said shortly, dragging some fresh clothes from her chest. After a short time, the fire crackled and blazed to life. Astrid heard a creak and a sigh as her mother took a seat on the bed behind her.

"Astrid, will you look at me please?"

The twisted scowl on Astrid's face felt so deeply rooted that there was a very real possibility it would become a permanent fixture. Her sour feelings were certainly on full display. Nevertheless she turned, arms crossed, and stared at her mother.

Brunhilda was seated with her hands on her thighs. She reached out for Astrid's hands, and the young warrior grudgingly unfolded her arms to present them. Her mother smiled and rubbed her palms in a soothing way. "I'm glad you're alive, Astrid. I was so worried we'd lost you."

"Thanks."

Brunhilda frowned. "I understand what just happened. I know what you and Fishlegs just told the village, and I know it's a lie. You never cared for Hiccup Haddock. The boy was an annoyance."

"He wasn't -"

"He had his strengths." Brunhilda said, nodding, "But I know you didn't recognize them."

Astrid said nothing. She knew that eventually she would be forced to defend this new story, but at that moment she was eternally grateful that at least one person had seen through it. At least one person knew who she truly was, and what she truly valued. Her cold scowl disintegrated and she melted into her mother's arms, shutting her eyes tightly against the world.

Brunhilda held her daughter close, rocking her gently and brushing her hair the way she used to. She rested her cheek against Astrid's forehead and said, "What's going on, Astrid? What were you doing in Stoick's house? Why did you take that sketch?"

"It's complicated, mum."

"Try me."

But Astrid remained stubbornly silent.

"You know you just presented your shield to Stoick."

"As a loyal warrior."

"After what Fishlegs said, that's not how the village is going to see it."

"And how would they see it, then?"

"As a daughter, and a grieving widow."

Astrid was quiet for some time. Then she said, "I don't care how they see it."

"I think Stoick shares their sentiment."

"So what?"

"So just be prepared, Astrid. You just declared your undying love for his son in front of the entire village. I don't know why you lied to them and I don't know what you're hiding, but for every action there are consequences."

* * *

><p>This story is very heavily influenced by Midoriko-Sama's becoming trilogy. It may not appear obvious now, but all of this is set up for Hiccup's return. Stoick's going to take a bit of a beating in this story. He's the main antagonist, afterall. But I'll try to make him somewhat sympathetic as well.

Also I'm going to be a little more loose with Viking laws and culture so that Berk better matches the Berk we see in the movies and the show. And of course it gives me room to play.

For those of you waiting for news on the next chapter of Fallout 3: Mutatis Mutandis, including the battle to retake Rivet City and the Purifier from the supermutants, it is currently being written. I'm 2700 words in, which is about 1700 words more than it was a week ago.

Anyway please let me know what your thoughts are on this newest development on Berk. How well was the trial laid out, and what do you think the consequences are going to be?

20. Chapter 20

**If you see the name Leo mentioned early in this chapter, please

don't get confused. I've made an historical error, and I intend to correct it. There's a full explanation at the bottom of the page.**

* * *

><p>Prodigal Son 20</p>

"Hiccup. Hiccup, wait! Hiccup, stop!"

Artemisia chased him around the tiled courtyard of her villa and out the front door, into the garden where Toothless was waiting with round eyes and a wagging tail.

"Battle ready!" the young man barked. The dragon dropped to all fours, teeth bared, and body taut, ready to take off. Hiccup knelt beside his friend and began to run through his pre-flight equipment checks.

Artemisia caught up with him there. "Hiccup, you need to listen to me."

"I'm going back out there." He said curtly, tugging on the saddle's wire-reinforced straps and checking them for tears. It was a very real danger at Toothless' top speeds. Even the smallest tear could result in the entire assembly disintegrating. It had nearly happened once already a year before. The Wingsuit had saved his life, but if Hiccup had been a fraction of a second slower locking Toothless' prosthetic open, the dragon would have dropped out of the sky like a stone. Even with his anger and his rush to leave, it was a risk Hiccup was unwilling to take.

"I know Shahira betrayed us, but there is a larger picture."

"I'm not going after her." He paused, chewing his lip. "At least not yet."

She frowned. "Then where-?"

"Neptune's Pride found them the same time I did." He explained, concentrating on his checks so that he didn't have to look at her. "I killed two of them and Toothless burned their sails and blew a massive hole in their boat. I thought—" he swallowed. "I thought I was rescuing her."

"Oh, Hiccup!" She sighed sadly.

"I'm going to find them, and bring them home."

"You can't."

"You're the one who lectured me on fixing mistakes!" he snapped angrily, finally looking up at her, "Or was that a bunch of hot air? I screwed this up. I have to fix it. I owe it to them."

"There are bigger issues here. How long would it take a ship to get to Byzantium from Alexandria?"

"A few days." Hiccup checked the adjustment pedal, and pulled Toothless' emergency lever to make sure the fail-safes were in

place.

"And how long will it take you?"

"A few hours."

"Hiccup, you have to warn Emperor Leo. It will take him time to marshal his forces and put a fleet in the water to help us. We don't know how long we have until the Moorish pirates get here, so we need to give him as much time as possible."

"Those men are stranded out there because of me!"

"How many were on that boat? Two or three dozen? Because there are several thousand people living in this city."

"And they aren't stranded in hostile waters."

"Martius' men knew the risks."

"Oh, I bet they did!" Hiccup shot back bitterly, "I bet the first question they asked when they set out was: How can we make this boat dragon proof?"

"Hiccup, look at me!" He glanced up just long enough for her to say, "Do not sacrifice this city, which has stood for twelve hundred years, for the sake of cleaning your guilty conscience."

Hiccup moved down to Toothless' tail, checking the mechanisms. Toothless himself was watching both of them with a curious and uneasy gaze. The dragon could sense their distress and the hostility in their argument, and he was thoroughly confused. Hiccup said, "Because there are bigger things at stake?"

"Because it wouldn't work. You're trading the crew of a ship for the residents and history of an entire city. If the Saracens sack Alexandria, the first people murdered will be myself and your classmates."

Hiccup stopped moving in mid-check. He sat back on his heels and took a long breath, finally giving her his full attention.

"There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His messenger.' That is the flag they fly, Hiccup. These people do not have room in their ideology for the sorts of questions Plato asked, or the sorts of questions I ask. They don't search for greater truths, or seek compromise. They may keep the purely mathematical advances, but the Greek plays; Prometheus, The Iliad, the Odyssey, Lysistrataâ€¦ they'll all go. All the philosophical works by Plato, Aristotle, and all who followed them will be deemed heretical and burned. All the Roman historians from Cato to Tacitus, all of their works will be destroyed. They will not tolerate the existence of the Library, or the Museo, or my classroom in the Agora."

"It sounds to me like you're just as scared for your life as I bet those sailors are." Hiccup told her, his voice sour.

Her mouth dropped open in surprise, and then her eyes narrowed. A day ago, he would have apologized, but that was before he left a boatload of loyal Alexandrian guardsmen stranded in Saracen waters. Not to

mention helping two traitors escape. He got to his feet and crossed his arms, standing by the statement, and daring her to respond.

She glared at him. "I'm scared of everything Alexander and the Ptolemies created being torn apart by zealots. I'm scared of losing Alexander's legacy. The only 'Truth' left will be what's in the Koran. The human race will stop asking questions and seeking enlightenment. It'll halt progress for hundreds of years to come. A lot of what we lose, we cannot get back. We cannot let that happen. You need to warn the Emperor, and give him time to get a fleet down here to protect this city, and its library."

Hiccup looked back down at Toothless' prosthetic. The dragon warbled and curled around him, sniffing him, searching for the source of his distress.

Artemisia said, "I know it's not what you want to do, but part of being a leader is making difficult cho-"

"Stop! Justâ€| stop. Stop lecturing me." Hiccup shook his head. "Godsâ€| not everything can be learned from a book, Artemisia! I'm sure it's easy for some old philosopher writing in his study to tell me to let go of guilt and act for the greater good, but Plato is not here right now!"

"Hiccup-"

"I'm not done! I know what this city means to you. I know what saving it will protect: You. Your job, your hobbies, and your values. Those are perfectly good reasons on their own. Just stop telling me it's about higher ideals. I'm not you. I have my own values, and one of them is not letting good people die. Not if I can help it. It's long past time I started living up to that." He threw a leg over Toothless' saddle and the dragon reared up. Hiccup stared down at the dumbstruck teacher and said, "And that's exactly what I'm going to do." He patted Toothless' snout. "Let's go, bud."

* * *

><p>There was a fleet on the horizon. No, not a fleet, it was a fleet of fleets. Hundreds of masts, thousands of sailors and soldiers, armor glinting in the moonlight, swarming like ants across the decks of each vessel. The ships stretched away towards Crete in a long line, and they bore down on Neptune's Pride; a vast wooden wall, stretching north and south for half a kilometer.</p>

The damaged Alexandrian vessel was listing to one side. Its sail was half-burned, but still had enough meat to pick up some wind. Most of the men aboard were rowing furiously to keep up speed. Three Saracen scouting ships had been dispatched from the main fleet to investigate, and were coming up quickly on Neptune's Pride.

Hiccup dealt with them first. He and Toothless circled to the south until they were viewing the ships' broadsides. Then his dragon opened fire with three rapid shots, hitting each ship at the waterline. Wood splintered, men screamed, and all three vessels halted immediately as the pirate crews turned their efforts towards preventing each ship from taking on water.

Man and dragon did a pirouette and glided over to Neptune's Pride.

The crew had thought their number was up when they heard the whistling. They watched Hiccup's activities with some amount of confusion, but it turned to panic when the big black dragon landed on their deck. The sailors threw themselves away from him, picking up any weapons they could find. Hiccup leapt off of Toothless' back before they could get themselves organized and raised his hands. "I want to talk to your captain!"

One sailor ran forward, brandishing a trident.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Martius sent me!" Hiccup threw up his hands, "Martius sent me!"

"Hold!" a voice cried out. A dark-skinned man in a brown tunic stepped forward. He was carrying an enormous sabre in his bare arms. "I'm the captain. Naviid Khader."

The aggressive sailor moved back, obeying his captain.

"My name is Hiccup. Martius sent me to help you."

"Well, Hiccup, explain to me why my men and I shouldn't chop you and your demon to pieces." The man unslung his sword. Behind Hiccup, Toothless began to growl. A low, primeval noise which made the other sailors back away.

"Look, I screwed up, alright. I made a mistake, I attacked the wrong ship. I can go on my knees and apologize, or I can help you fix the problem. You can hate me all you like, I won't blame you, but I can help you. Please let me help."

Captain Khader gave him a stern examination. He nodded to the black eagle crest on Hiccup's shoulder. "Varangian?"

"Uuhâ€|formerly. I'm kindaâ€| freelance now. But I'm with you guys. Three Saracen ships are sinking back there. If that isn't proof I don't know what else I can doâ€|"

"You can get me a god-damned sail to replace the one your beast burned!" the man snapped.

"Done." Hiccup said cheerfully. The captain stepped back, startled. Hiccup climbed onto Toothless and took off without another word. The Saracen vessels were sinking rapidly. The closest of them had already capsized. The second was tilting dangerously, taking on water. A third was in flames, tongues of fire already licking at the canvas.

Hiccup directed Toothless to the middle boat. Several Saracen sailors were already in the water. The rest were trying to climb to the high side to escape the cold ocean. Toothless landed on the saxboard, causing the sinking vessel to shudder. The Saracen pirates, a dozen in total, sitting on it froze, staring at the beast in shock and fear. A few clambered away. Four more let go of their handholds and slid into the water.

The closest man, however, shouted a prayer to his god and drew his heavy, ornate, straight-bladed sword with a blunt end. It was called a khanda. The swords originated somewhere in the orient. The blade of a blunt butcher. Hiccup had encountered them before on the

battlefields of Bulgaria.

Toothless had reared up, roaring at the open threat. Hiccup leapt off his dragon's back and landed on the tilting deck. He reached for his gladius, and then remembered too late that he had left it with Shahira and her father.

The khanda's heavy blade came whipping across at neck height, and he ducked, hearing Toothless' enraged roars. From his crouched position, he grabbed the nameless pirate's foot and pulled as hard as he could. The Saracen lost his footing on the sloped deck and spilled downwards, but not before Hiccup ripped the khanda from his grasp and kicked him in the throat. He climbed forward, the boat rocking as behind him Toothless bore down on the unfortunate pirate. There was the ugly noise of chewing teeth and cracking bone. The man let out a scream which was cut mercifully short. The rest of the Saracens promptly leapt into the water, leaving Hiccup and Toothless alone on the tilted, bloody deck.

He immediately set about climbing the mast, using the edge of the khanda to bite into the hard wood so that he could pull himself up. He reached the swaying crossbeam, to which their pristine canvas sail was bound, and sliced through the rigging, letting the loose canvas flutter to the deck. He tossed the sword away and called out, "Toothless!" Below him, the dragon leapt upwards. Hiccup dropped back down onto his saddle. "Grab the sail, bud!"

The dragon did, digging in with all four of his paws before spreading his massive black wings and taking off. The ship shrank as they rose high into the air and headed back to Neptune's Pride.

They dropped the sail first, and it landed on the deck with a whumph. Hiccup heard captain Khader's voice, "Spread it out! Start cutting it to size!"

The Alexandrian sailors worked quickly, four of them kneeling on the blank canvas with knives and thread while another two brought their sail down. The rest of the crew was manning the oars, trying to keep ahead of the steadily advancing pirate fleet.

"Hiccup!" the captain waved him down. They landed on the deck. This time the crew ignored them, entirely focused as they were on repairs and escape.

Khader pulled him aside. "This ship is losing too much ground. Even if we repair the sail, the Moors will be upon us before we can make it back to Alexandria."

"Don't go back to Alexandria, that's where this fleet is going." Hiccup advised. "Head north. They'll let you alone. They have bigger fish to catch."

Khader's expression darkened. "I have a wife and child in Alexandria. So do most of my men. We will go back and we will defend our homes."

Hiccup let out a long breath, staring at the captain's grim face. He said, "Toothless and I will do what we can to keep those ships off of you. How long do you need?"

Khader glanced at the hurried repairs. "Twenty minutes?"

"We'll give you thirty." Hiccup promised, equally as determined.

"The wind is heading due south. Don't let that fleet circle north of us." The captain advised. "If they do, all those Saracen sails will steal our wind, and we'll be done for. Our oars can't outrun them."

They both turned to look at the pirate fleet. Already a small contingent of Moorish ships had broken away, and was circling north, rapidly gaining ground as they caught the strong breeze.

"Toothless!" The dragon bounded over. His gummy smile was somewhat offset by the fact that his jaws were still wet with Saracen blood. Hiccup climbed onto his back. "We've still got a night of fighting left, bud."

The dragon growled, and his eyes narrowed on the Saracen fleet.

"Hiccup," Khader called out. "Thanks for the help."

"Just doing what I had to." Hiccup replied, "Let's go, bud!"

They shot upwards first, far above the southern air currents which the ships relied upon. The Saracen fleet, which had provided such a wide, strong front from sea-level, was revealed to be a long, wide column. Hiccup could see lights stretching all the way to the Horizon. Another fleet was zig-zagging its way north from Barqah, another two-dozen ships to join the massive armada.

The front of the line was a group of large vessels, teeming with heavily armoured soldiers. The ships behind them had siege equipment and long bulks of timber for construction. This was an army created not only to take, but to keep. The ships in front were moving slowly, heavy-laden as they were. It was slowing down the entire fleet, but that clearly didn't matter much to the Saracen commanders. It wasn't an army built for speed, or stealth. They intended to bludgeon Alexandria into submission. To take the docks and pour troops in until the city was swamped.

"We gotta slow'em down, bud." Hiccup said. On the northern edge of the fleet's front line, a half-dozen faster frigates were breaking ranks and circling around to catch up with Neptune's pride. Hiccup could see the strategy; steal the Alexandrian vessel's wind, then let the larger warships catch up and crush it.

The real threat was the larger warships. Hiccup eyed them up, choosing carefully. There was one near the center, laden with thinner lengths of lumber. No doubt for boarding and offloading troops. He leaned forward, prompting the dragon to circle lower and lower until he knew Toothless wouldn't miss.

"That one, bud. Right in the center. Turn it to splinters."

Toothless huffed an affirmation. He opened his mouth and Hiccup heard

that strange whistling noise which always occurred when Toothless was charging one of his shots. The blast plunged into the vessel at high speed, and then detonated. The entire ship shuddered and expanded outwards, a blossom of red and yellow fire flowering in its belly, bending the planks and timber until suddenly it exploded. Men and flaming bulks of timber rained down on the ships all around it, setting sails and rigging alight, and sending the Saracen sailors diving for cover. A blue ring of heated plasma expanded outwards from the center of the explosion, scorching sails and rigging in a wide swath of the fleet.

A hail of arrows rose in response, but Toothless batted his wings a few times and took both of them safely out of range. Most of the arrows cleared the burning ships and peppered the ocean's surface. Some landed on the flaming vessels, and a few of those hit some unfortunate sailors.

The Saracen fleet was in chaos. The flames were easily overtaking nearby ships, which were full of dry wood. Hiccup could hear faint orders being passed backwards along the column. The massive fleet began to disperse, each ship altering course to avoid the firestorm. But there wasn't much room to maneuver without hitting other ships. More and more vessels, unable to alter course, entered the firestorm. The sea was alive with men, swimming desperately to escape the fire. Many of them were dragged under, weighed down by their own armor. Flaming vessels crashed into one another, creating a giant floating island, roaring with fire. Toothless and Hiccup circled, rising on the thermals. Black smoke billowed out, rising south towards Barqah.

"Good job, bud." Hiccup said, feeling slightly nauseated. The dragon crooned happily and Hiccup patted him on the snout. Toothless was so friendly to him. It was difficult, sometimes, to remember just why Night Furies were as feared as they were. He remembered moments from his childhood, running for cover the moment anyone heard that signature whistling noise. After this, it would be feared across the Mediterranean as well. Hiccup did not exactly see this as cause to celebrate.

He looked back towards Neptune's Pride. The other three frigates were nearly upon them, a mere hundred meters or so behind. He leaned forward, pushing Toothless into a steep dive. They caught the downdraft column the thermals were causing, and picked up even more speed as they raced towards the frothing whitecaps. Hiccup let out a holler and Toothless followed suit, emitting a long, primal, bellowing roar which echoed across the Mediterranean. Thirty meters from the waves, Hiccup pulled them out of their dive, grinning as g-forces sucked at him. "Hit'em with warning, bud. Just a little one."

Toothless let out a single, weaker shot. It hit the mast of the leading frigate. Wood splintered, and the timber tilted slowly over and fell into the ocean. It dragged the rigging with it, causing the ship to list over to one side. Unable to steer, the wind hit its broadside and pushed it south, out of the way. The other two boats turned south on a broad run and fled towards the Egyptian coastline, leaving Neptune's Pride free and clear, with Hiccup and Toothless hovering protectively between them and the Saracen fleet.

Hiccup circled the Alexandrian vessel. They had the Saracen sail

spread out on their deck, and were busy cutting it to size and fitting it to their rigging. As he buzzed by, the sailors cheered and applauded. He could see Captain Khader Giving him a salute with that enormous scimitar. Hiccup waved back, and then pulled backwards, prompting the dragon upwards. They spent some time there, keeping watch and circling on the thermals. The pillar of smoke was enormous, filling the southern sky with a thick haze.

Another ten minutes passed before he saw the Saracen sail rise on Neptune's Pride. The pirate fleet had halted. Many ships had dropped anchor. They had no choice but to wait. The flaming jumble of debris was slowly moving south, pushed by the wind and tide. Boats weren't ramming into it anymore, but the entire fleet was stuck waiting for it to pass. They couldn't go around it; that would involve sailing into the wind. Ships had to zig-zag back and forth, moving slowly north before they could once again resume their course east. Easy enough for one ship, but an entire fleet would have to break formation, and it was too much to risk more collisions and disorganization. Hiccup kept Toothless in sight, circling; a constant threat of more damage and destruction.

The crew of Neptune's Pride set their new sail and began to pick up speed, heading east towards Alexandria. Hiccup made sure they were off the horizon before he and Toothless soared away themselves.

* * *

><p>Emperor Leo V sat at a large and exquisitely decorated table in his chambers. Silver plates and chalices had been set down carefully all around the table, every place set, despite the fact he was dining alone. The cooks were on form that night; two dozen dishes of fresh fish, beef, and poultry seasoned with spices all the way from kingdoms in China and India lay carefully arranged across the table. His taste tester had already checked for poisons, and now Leo was looking forward to tasting all the dishes himself. He would eat what he desired and send the rest of the feast be thrown away.</p>

Leo had served as a military commander early in his life, serving under Bardanes Tourkos, a high-profile general who had rebelled against Byzantium's previous emperor. Tourkos' coup had failed, and Leo had been exiled, only to be recalled eight years later by his predecessor Michael I Rhangabe. Indeed, he had been awarded with several extensive properties for his military accomplishments. From there Leo had bided his time, and eventually used his heavy political clout to force Rhangabe to abdicate.

And then he had been crowned Emperor. He had immediately ordered the castration of Rhangabe's sons, in order to prevent any children or grandchildren from challenging his claim to the throne. After that, he had waged extensive campaigns against Khan Krum of Bulgaria, who was blockading supplies to Byzantium. Krum had defeated previous emperors in battle, even going so far as line the skull of Emperor Nikephoros with gold, turning it into a drinking goblet.

Leo had driven Krum back into the mountains, where the old Khan had finally died. His son Omurtag had taken over control of the Bulgarian Khanate. With the help of his Varangian fighters, Leo had defeated Omurtag immediately at Nessebar. He used the defeat to engineer a thirty-year peace with the Bulgarians, and lent the majority of his Varangians to the Carolingian Empire so that Charlemagne and Louis

the Pious could continue battering Omurtag's exhausted forces. Charlemagne put the mercenaries to use in the west in his Iberian wars against the Umayyad Caliphate. This served double duty. It solidified the alliance between the eastern and western roman empires, and kept the Frankish kingdom in a weakened state, preventing any potential aggression against Byzantium.

With his borders and trade routes secure, Leo consolidated his power. He jailed one of his generals on suspicion of conspiracy, and began several internal projects to help the Byzantine economy recover. His aggressive foreign policy had left the Empire in a precarious financial position, and so he reinstated the Iconoclasm, seizing church property in the name of piety when in actuality the gold and silver helped him to pay his military bills.

It also helped him outfit his palace. The Great Palace of Constantinople had stood for nearly five hundred years. The Palace was an enormous complex of buildings covering nearly two square kilometers of ground. Situated right beside the public sports arena, it housed a barracks for the Emperor's Varangian Guards, a church, baths, and the Imperial Residence.

Leo had just put stained glass in his dining hall. So it really annoyed him when a fearsome black dragon crashed through the glass and landed on his table. He reflexively covered his face to protect it from the shards of glass, and fell from his chair, crying out for his guards. Doors slammed open, and he was dragged backwards behind stalwart shield wall. Viking guardsmen closed in around him in a protective cluster, bristling with spears, pikes, axes and swords.

The dragon towered over them, light rippling across its scales like black velvet. The beast possessed a sleek shape. Streamlined with a broad head and soulless, slitted green eyes. Tiny trails of smoke curled from its nostrils as it breathed.

It was wearing a saddle. Leather straps criss-crossed under its belly, and metal stirrups had been carefully placed at its flanks. The rider was a tall figure, appearing as streamlined as his ferocious steed. He was dressed in brown and black form-fitting leathers with sturdy boots and a sturdy, leather-clad helmet. A pair of piercing green eyes gazed at him through the slits.

"Please nobody move!" the figure said in muffled tones. The following silence was punctuated by the black beast's growling.

One of the Imperial guardsmen charged forward, thrusting with his spear. The black beast opened its mouth and coughed an electric blue ball of light and fire. The guard vanished, leaving the acrid smell of burnt flesh and a pair of smoking boots behind.

"Well that was just a brilliant tactical maneuver." The masked rider said, swinging a leg over and sliding to the table, where he stood with one arm over the monster's neck. "What part of 'please nobody move!' didn't he get? I thought I'd spoken clearly." He turned to the beast and ran a hand along its broad, black snout. "And bud, we've talked about this! Be civilized. You can't just blow people away every time someone shakes a stick at you!"

The nightmare warbled a protest.

"I don't care if the stick was pointy or not! We're standing in front of the Emperor of Byzantium. Now's not the time to be firing off plasma blasts willy nilly!"

It warbled again, ears quivering as it fixed its rider with a pointed look. The young man sighed. "Alright. Not willy nilly. It was a very deliberate and precise plasma blast."

To the amazement of its audience, the creature sat back on its haunches and preened like a regal lion.

"which you still shouldn't have fired." The visitor added.

It growled and whipped him in the back of the head with its tail, producing a surprising clang noise as alien mechanisms on its tail collided with his helmet.

"Oh, get over it, bud!" The stranger turned to the Emperor and his huddled guards. The helmet was removed to reveal a young man's face with a pointed chin, thoughtful brows and a wild mane of feathery auburn hair.

"Heeey guuys." The figure waved awkwardly. "Leo! Can I call you Leo? How's your day been?"

"Don't answer it, my lord!" A guard warned, "It rides ride a demon!"

The youth sighed and exchanged a tired look with his beast. "Never gets old, does it, bud?"

His creature crooned mournfully and shook its head. It bent over and began to sniff at the plates of food.

"Toothless! How can you eat at a time like this? Also, don't swallow any glass please."

The demon hissed at him, and then downed an entire chicken in one bite. Leo groaned; he'd been looking forward to that bird. It had been baked in seven different Lebanese spices.

"Okay, here's the thingâ€|" the rider explained, "I've had a really trying week. First I got told that I had to leave my school, then there was this girl who I thought was into me but it turns out she wasn't and -twist ending! There's a giant Saracen fleet about to attack Alexandria and they could really use your help! So if you could see your way through to summoning up the old army and giving those bastards the ol' one-two punch I think we'd all very much appreciate it. Thank you for your cooperation."

This declaration was met with stunned silence. Then Leo said, "Young man, don't you know there is a proper way to bring your complaints to the court's attention?"

"I was in a bit of a hurry."

"You broke through my window and ruined my dinner!"

"Wow. When you say it like that, it does sound almost as terrible as

being burned and hacked to pieces by Saracen pirates." The man said, deadpanned. "I'm sure the citizens of Alexandria would sympathize with you."

"You're riding a demon!"

"It's just a dragon!"

"The Devil's Beast!" one of the guards declared.

"That is really not helping."

"Here, he's wearing our colors!" An angry guardsmen explained. The boy was indeed wearing Varangian colors. A black eagle crest adorned the thick leather pauldron on his right shoulder.

"You're one of mine?" Leo asked.

"Kinda." The man rubbed the back of his neck in an awkward and strangely human gesture. "I quit after you ordered me to steal from churches."

"Are you a Christian?"

"I worship Thor and Odin. But that doesn't make stealing right."

Leo studied the lean, gangly youth. The man was young. In his early twenties. Practically a child.

"You're a Norsemen?" A guard asked.

"Far north. You?"

"Normandy. Came with the first settlers."

"Berk."

"Never heard of it."

"Small island twelve days north of Hopeless, and a few degrees south of Freezing-To-Death."

The guards glanced at one another, all of them looking equally as flummoxed. The visitor addressed Leo. "I served with the Franks in the Iberian Peninsula, and fought the Bulgarians with you at Nessebar. Took an axe to the chest, actually."

"Nessebar was a number of years ago." Leo said. "Where's your proof?"

"I don't wear this symbol lightly, sir." The boy said politely, gesturing at his shoulder.

"I don't recall a dragon being mentioned on my equipment and personnel lists. I feel sure I would have remembered."

"He ummâ€ he tagged along."

"Even if you're a liar, I doubt many would argue with your beast." One of the guards observed.

"He can be a stubborn one." The visitor agreed. "Look, Leo—"

"Emperor."

"Emperor. I'm not here to hurt you, and my dragon won't either. Not unless anyone charges at me again." He ran an intelligent eye along the shield wall. The half-dozen soldiers tensed.

"Well then what are you doing here?"

"Told you before, sir. Alexandria is under attack."

"Why should I care about Alexandria? It's just one city on the wrong side of the Mediterranean. My empire has a hard time enough trying to support Louis' efforts in Spain."

The visitor's brow furrowed. "Alexandria's a part of your empire and they need help!"

"If they are worthy then God will see their cause is just, and He will save them from the Heathens."

"Oookay. You know what? You suck. You just suck. You're a terrible king. This is why I left the Varangians. The other soldiers were alright, but the leadership just sucked. You can't use God to excuse laziness!"

"Don't speak to my Emperor in that tone!" one of the guardsmen warned.

"I've got a loaded dragon." The youth snapped back. "I'll speak to him how I like."

The guard looked as though he were about to offer a rebuke, but then Leo laid a hand on his shoulder. "Leave us."

Helmeted heads turned. Leo fixed them with a glare of his own. "Do you really think the six of you could stop this beast? This man wants to talk business with me, and I will allow it."

Stunned and confused, they filed out. The door closed, and Leo was left alone with the visitor and his living shadow of a dragon. The youth was surveying the curtains and fine silver. "This is quite a place you've set up here."

"As an Emperor responsible for land and people across the Mediterranean, I can afford certain privileges."

"Uh-huh."

Leo considered his strange guest. "You have some nerve, calling me a poor ruler in front of my men."

"You have some nerve, saying you're responsible for people across the Mediterranean, and then ignoring them when trouble strikes. Crete is attacking with a fleet. I've seen it. And they're backed up by ships and men from the Umayyad Caliphate."

Leo nodded thoughtfully, rubbing his bearded chin. He strode forward and grabbed a small jar from the table, ignoring the growling monster. He held it up, revealing the translucent amber crumbs within. "Do you know what this is, boy?"

"No."

"It is Myrrh. A spice from the Orient. One gram of this is worth an Ingot of gold. A sack of Myrrh will buy you a small village. Ten boats, a kingdom. Alexandria is a single city sitting on the wrong side of the Mediterranean Sea, surrounded on all sides by Caliphates. Gaining that ground and owning the south side of the Mediterranean Sea would be a great symbolic victory for the Saracen Khalifs to show their people. They hold control over many routes of the Silk Road, and recently they've been cutting off trade. I give them Alexandria, and in return they keep the spices and the silk flowing into the Byzantine Empire."

"So they bought you with spices!"

"Bought me?" Leo spat, "Don't be absurd."

"What do you call it then?" the rider snapped.

"Alexandria is one city of a few thousand people. I hold dominion over a vast expanse of Europe. Byzantium is recovering from Krum's Bulgarian invasion, and we're supporting Louis' war with a Caliphate in the Iberian Peninsula--"

"That's still going, huh?" the stranger asked bitterly, "I guess neither side is really trying all that hard."

"You fought in my army."

"I quit your army. And the more I learn about you the more I'm glad I did."

"I give them a few thousand souls in Alexandria, and in return they bring wealth to millions of my people and financial security to my empire's war-time economy. They did not buy me. It was a trade of the sort rulers make all the time."

"Why would a Caliphate in the east pay for you to fight a war with a Caliphate in the west?"

"Because Caliphates are separate nations of their own. Some are Shia, others are Sunni and they fight each other. I don't much care about their internal struggles so much as it benefits my empire. Byzantium no longer cares about Alexandria. There will be no reinforcements. If you have family or friends there, I suggest you fly back on your dragon beast and help them escape."

"But there are things in Alexandria worth protecting! What about the Library? What about enlightenment and the search for truth?"

"The loss of knowledge is regrettable." Leo agreed. "But books have always been written and books will continue to be written. What value is there in such ancient texts? We have the Bible, the word of God Himself. That is enough to guide us through. The Bible is the

only truth we need."

"There's more in those texts! Roman history and Greek philosophy! We have a responsibility to spread knowledge and understanding! Even if you don't care about the people, at least save the books."

Leo chuckled. "For whom? The people of this Holy Roman Empire are illiterate. Would you like to know the benefits of an Illiterate population? The people only hear what my town criers are paid to tell them. The only believe what the priests say. They don't think too much. It makes my job a lot easier."

The young man gawked helplessly. Leo side and retook his seat and, with an expression of boredom, stared up at the dragon. He gave his mysterious visitor a pitying smile. "You poor fool."

"Hey!"

"Someone has been filling your mind with the most worthless drivel, young man. Alexandria, whatever past glories it may represent, is a mere shell. An empty drain on Byzantium's finances. One I do not feel is necessary for my empire to flourish. Most of Byzantium's trade occurs over land routes. That is why I waged a war against Khan Krum and his Bulgarian hordes. I was securing my Empire's economic strength. As was Alexander when he founded that city. Alexandria was not created out of high-minded philosophical ideals. It was created it as a center of business which has since moved elsewhere, and he named it after himself for the same reason he put his face on temples and statues and coins. A smart ruler makes himself the face of the nation, and ensures that no matter where people look, they see his face incorporated into symbols of strength, guidance, and security. He makes himself a fixture of their daily lives. And what is more necessary to survival than coin?"

"Alexander was a great man!"

"He was a brilliant tactician, and a brutal tyrant." Leo leaned forward and popped a grape into his mouth. "A good ruler must be nothing less."

"Butâ€¦ but the Libraryâ€¦"

"Was built by the Ptolemies, descended from one of Alexander's Generals. There was no high-minded idealism there either. The ruling Greek class felt that too many foreigners were gaining too much power in the city and they set about Hellenizing Alexandria to assert the superiority of Greek culture. That Library and the Museo were created to dominate and subjugate their rowdy citizens. It also gave the aristocracy something else to be snobbish about. You mentioned you dislike stealing? Well most of the books in that Godforsaken, rotting mausoleum were stolen from incoming trading vessels, private citizens, and the libraries of other nations."

The youth had gone pale, eyes wide with anger and confusion. But Leo noted the way his hands were balling into fists. The Emperor laughed. "Go ahead. Do me harm, boy. You've already given my guards the name of your little island. Berk, was it? These men have vowed on their honor to protect me, and they take failure very seriously. You or your beast hurt me, and the entire Norse world will descend upon your

island and sink it back into the sea."

The youth was wide-eyed and shaking, and he looked so forlorn that Leo was moved to offer him a glass of wine. "Have a drink, and then get back on your beast and go home, young man. Save those you care about and learn how to silence your conscience. It'll only do you harm."

The dragon's eyes had grown wide, and Leo was surprised at how much less threatening it appeared as it watched its rider the way a concerned young child would watch an angry mother.

The visitor's lips thinned into a pale, grim line. "Enjoy your meal, sir. I'm going to go fight for Alexandria."

"I wish you the best of luck." Leo raised his glass in salute. "Just know there will be no reinforcements."

The youth replaced his helmet, mounted his dragon, and threw the Emperor a vitriolic salute. "Sorry about your window, sir."

"Don't fret." Leo replied, sipping his wine. "That little bottle of Myrrh will more than pay for it."

The dragon took off with a whoosh, and the strange visitor vanished into the night.

Soâ€| Dragons existed then, Leo mused. Such beasts might offer a distinct tactical advantage, if used properly. He had thought them legend, but he also understood that even as Emperor of the most powerful nation on God's earth, even he didn't know everything.

He sat down and carefully composed a letter to Louis the Pious. Clearly Danes from Berk were a disloyal lot with strange ideas. A watch would have to be kept. Especially if the Vikings had learned to fly deadly mythical creatures. After a time a young servant came in to remove the dinner, and what little remained of the burnt guard. A pity, that was.

Still, it was one less salary to pay.

* * *

><p>I've made a mistake.

**You see, at this period in history (815-825AD), there were two "Roman" empires. The Byzantine Empire, which possessed extensive territory around the Mediterranean, and the Carolingian Empire (Holy Roman Empire), which was most of northern and western Europe.
**

**These facts don't really change much in the story until this very chapter, because it's all background information in a larger picture. Just some minor conversations between characters in early chapters. Still, after I post this chapter, I'm going to be slowly going back over previous chapters to correct my mistake where necessary. Every time I mentioned Charlemagne and Louis the Pious as Emperors of Byzantium, I should have been talking about Emperor Leo V. It was *his* wars against the Umayyad Caliphate and the Bulgarians in which Hiccup fought, and it was *his* Iconoclast which caused Hiccup to

desert the Varangian Guard.**

I also want to reiterate that I've introduced the Varangian Guard a little earlier than they actually appeared historically. According to Wikipedia (Always a reliable source of information :/) the earliest evidence of Vikings being brought over to conduct warfare on behalf of a European ruler was in 874AD, around fifty-five to sixty years after this story takes place. A more reliable number, for which there is evidence, is 988AD, over a hundred years later.

**Another thing I've used was the idea of the Varangian Guard having a crest to identify them. I don't think this is unreasonable; armies need uniforms and symbols to tell them apart from other armies, and give them something to be proud of and fight for. In this case I've stolen the idea of a black eagle crest which was used quite often in the military of the Roman Empire. **

Perhaps as Vikings, they would have chosen Thor's Hammer or a Norse symbol, but they would also be fighting on behalf of the Byzantine Empire- a nation descended from the Roman Empire. In the eleventh century, Byzantium adopted a double-headed golden eagle as its crest. Its soldiers would likely have worn such a symbol, or at least carried its standard into battle. However our story takes place in the ninth century- two hundred years earlier- and according to what little research I've done, they were still using the Roman Imperial Eagle. So I've chosen to adopt it as the standard this Varangian Guard which didn't exist yet would have marched under. I hope that wasn't too confusing.

**I do, however, want to point out that there is no historical evidence that the Varangians marched under such a crest. It is, however, a convenient plot device. A way for people to quickly identify Hiccup's affiliations. No doubt when he gets back to Berk he'll replace it with a black Night Fury like he wore in Dawn of the Dragon Racers, or perhaps the red Hairy Hooligan Crest he has in HTTYD2. **

**I can also confirm, finally and definitively, that we have only one more Hiccup chapter left before he ships off back to Berk. **

21. Chapter 21

Prodigal Son 21

Astrid awoke in an envelope of comfortable warmth. She kept her eyes shut, relishing the softness of her straw mattress. The furs atop her were heavy, and carried a familiar, comforting, musty smell. The air was cool, yet she could hear the Hofferson's hearthfire crackling nearby. Quiet voices murmured in the background. She snuggled up into a tighter ball, and grunted as she realized just how much everything hurt.

Her entire body ached. Her crotch, thighs and legs were still terribly sore from riding Stormfly for hours. Her hands, arms, and shoulders had spent much of that time tensed as she tried to keep her balance and overcome her fears and worries. Her abdomen was on fire, and she felt the irresistible urge to stretch absolutely everything.

A yawn forced its way out of her and before she knew it, all four limbs were spreading out in all directions. Her hands and feet poked out from under the covers, and clenched in the cool air. Astrid arched her back and went stiff as every muscle in her body tensed with the massive yawn. Several others followed, each as irresistible as the last.

Having endured that wonderful, cathartic exercise, she fell back, relaxed and spread-eagled under the covers, staring up at the thatched ceiling. Her eyes had teared up, and she blinked several times to clear them. Moving with tectonic slowness and stifling another yawn, Astrid pulled her covers back, exposing herself to the cold air. She rolled to one side and propped herself up on an elbow, leaning over the side of the bed. Her questing hands found a freshly laundered set of clothes which someone- probably her mum- had laid out for her. She pushed herself upright, wincing, and grabbed the wraps first.

"Astrid!" Haldor Hofferson stomped over from the hearthfire. He was dressed in a pair of old britches, and carrying a bowl of simmering stew.

"Morning dad."

"A good morning to you too, lass!" he said, beaming. "It's wash day today. Brunhilda and your sisters are all out."

"I should be out helping herâ€|" Astrid murmured, rubbing her eyes.

Her father reached up and rubbed her shoulder. "No you don't, Astrid! Your mother would flay me like a fish if she found you working today, after all you've been through." He leaned forward and pulled her into a tight hug. She would have returned the embrace, but not moving was so very comfortable an option. Even his squeezing was putting uncomfortable pressure on her ribs and shoulders.

"Ow! Please let go."

He released her immediately. "Of course. You must have fought your way out of Hel's realm."

"It feels like it." She said with a wry smile.

They both laughed. Haldor was beaming. He said, "I'm just so proud of you, Astrid. Your mother and I both are! We're so glad you're alive! And after the trial as wellâ€| the next few days are for you to rest, alright? Take it easy."

"I will."

His smile faltered, tempered by curiosity. "You never told me about the Haddock boy."

Astrid shrugged noncommittally, then winced again and reached around to massage her shoulders, rolling each in turn.

"You were so intense about training. I always thought it was your old Uncle Finn."

"I loved Uncle Finn. Hiccup wasâ€œ a tragedy." True. Or at least it would have been if the coward had actually died. "It shouldn't have happened." Also would have been true. Good thing it didn't? Perhaps. "He and Iâ€œ Dad, I need more time. I can't explore this right now. I just can't." Definitely true. That was an idea she could get behind.

Haldor Hofferson nodded in understanding. He leaned forward and embraced her again, this time much more gently. He kissed her crown, saying, "I didn't talk to you as much as I should have. I realized that while you were gone. But you're still our baby girl. Mine as much as Brunhilda's."

"Thanks dad."

"Your uncle Finn would have been proud too."

"â€œ thanks dad."

He kissed her once more on the top of the head, and then went back to the fire. Spitelout Jorgenson was there, and the two of them resumed a conversation in hushed tones.

Astrid tried for some time to drift off back to sleep, but her restlessness grew the more she considered the strangeness, and the peril of her situation. What was there to be done with Stormfly? She could train the dragon the way Hiccup had, but to what end? On the other hand, she could simply steel herself and kill the dragon.

With that image came others. The look of betrayal and pain she imagined in the Nadder's eyes made her grimace. As much as killing the beast would solve the problem and allow her to reinforce her commitment to Berk, it was also a low and dirty thing to do. Stormfly trusted her explicitly. She had saved Astrid's life multiple times, brought water when Astrid was thirsty, fish when she was hungry. She had carried Astrid when she couldn't walk or swim, and fended off an entire flock of _other dragons_ to save her life.

No, Astrid decided, killing Stormfly was not on the table. But what, then? Simply train the dragon in secret? Keep Stormfly cooped up in the cove her entire life? What if a hunting party happened upon her? What if Astrid was killed in a raid? Hiccup had left with Toothless, and though Astrid disagreed on principle with his decision, second by second she was growing to appreciate the complexity of his situation.

Restless, she rolled out of bed and pulled on that set of clean clothes. The stew went down quickly and cleanly, settling as a comfortable warmth in the pit of her stomach. She left her shield on the wall, but slung her axe across her back. Haldor gave her a nod from the fire pit, and she nodded back before opening the door and slipping out onto the dirt road which led towards the center of Berk.

The air was warm, and the sunlight on her face, as faint as it was shining through the clouds, was more than welcome. The burnt Hrolfson homestead had been stripped down and removed, leaving a large patch of clear dirt sprinkled with the occasional piece of charcoal. The Nightmare carcass had been dragged away as well, dumped over the nearby cliff side into the ocean, where a flock of white gulls

circled. Sand had been poured over the pool of blood it left behind.

There were only two members of the Hrolfson clan left: Hundolfr, and his eldest son Eyolf, who was around Astrid's age. A marriage had been proposed once. Astrid remembered Eyolf as a vaguely handsome face attached to an otherwise unremarkable warrior. Though a stack of neatly organized, freshly cut timber lay beside the empty lot, rebuilding an entire hall for two warriors was a needless drain on strained resources. It was quite likely that Eyolf and his father would settle in the Great Hall. Berk Vikings were an industrious lot, and replacing burnt homes was a well-practiced exercise. Astrid wondered who the new hall was going to belong to.

"Morning, Astrid." A nearby Viking called out, waving at her. He was lugging two sacks of grain down the road towards the store houses. She stared, taken aback by the cheerful greeting. What was the man's name again? He was a Saemingrson, she remembered that much. One of the brothers. Sirnir, or Snidil. They manned the northern catapults, and had brought down more than a few dragons. Neither of them had ever said a word to her before outside of combat.

"Good morning." She waved back as he passed, flummoxed.

The arena was on the far side of town, and as tiring and painful as movement was, she headed there out of habit. There would be no training for her today; even the best warriors had to rest after long battles, and she knew her limits. But the stone ring with its steel cage was something familiar, and she needed that. Her path took her through the center of the village, and she soon found herself being greeted on all sides by Berkians with glad smiles and open hands.

"Good morning, Astrid."

"Hello, Astrid!"

"I bet you taught the beasties a lesson, eh Astrid?"

"Astrid! Good to see you!"

"Morning Astrid, how goes your day?"

"Good Morning, Astrid!"

"Up and about already, eh Astrid?"

She did her best to greet them all in turn, but there were so many, and they were so cheerful! What in Hel's name was going on? Perplexed and overwhelmed by all the attention, she mumbled an excuse and retreated, circling around the outside of the village square, around the backs of the family halls, still intent on reaching the arena, where she could sit in silence and reflect on the strangeness of it all.

People did not smile at Astrid Hofferson! Her life wasn't some joke! Grim nods and perhaps a few words. That was how warriors communicated! Warriors were professional, stoic, and silent. Ready to fight and ready to die. Dragon killing was her business, not idle chatter.

Caught up in her sour thoughts, and feeling very much on edge, Astrid reacted entirely on auto-pilot when a hand grabbed her shoulder. Her assailant immediately found herself slammed into the wall of the nearest house, one arm twisted behind her back, a knee in her kidney, and a knife against her throat. Astrid recognized the woman immediately and released her, stepping back a few paces.

"Loki's Shit! Iona I'm sorry! I'm really sorry! I was just walking and thinking andâ€¦ shouldn't you be in the hall?"

"Washday. It's my day off." The young cook said, rubbing her wrist and staring up at Astrid.

"Sorry."

"It's alright." Iona said heavily as Astrid helped her to her feet.
"Warrior first, right?"

"What in Thor's name is going on? Why's everyone so cheerful? Are they all drunk?"

Iona laughed. "What do you mean? It's wash day. Of course they're drunk."

Astrid smiled. "No, I meantâ€¦ Everyone's so happy to see me. Not that they weren't before, I don't think, butâ€¦" She shrugged helplessly, "No one smiled before, you know?"

"You didn't smile at us, either, Astrid."

"Of course not! I had a job to do."

"Why should that stop you from smiling?"

"Becauseâ€¦" Astrid knew what her uncle Finn had always said: Being a warrior was a serious business.

"Everyone's talking about you and Hiccup." Iona said.

Astrid glowered. "They are?"

"Yeah." The cook smiled wistfully. "It's so romantic. I meanâ€¦ not that I want toâ€¦ trivialize it or anything. It's tragic, really. If you ever want to talk about it-"

"Stop that!" Astrid snapped. "I'm not some love-sick weepingâ€¦ maiden or widow or whatever!"

Iona nodded. "Sure. Exceptâ€¦ look, you made an impression yesterday, with the unexpected entrance. I mean, we all thought you had died, and then the trial and everything. It's likeâ€¦ we finally know Astrid Hofferson, you know? Everyone's talking."

Astrid glanced through a gap between the halls. The town was thrumming with energy. People moved back and forth along stalls full of fresh food. Several fishing vessels were pulling in at the docks, unloading their cargo. A group of young children whizzed past, waving wooden swords around. 0

She turned back to Iona. "What are they saying?"

"You're a hero, for starters. My husband Styr was talking to the Jorgensons, and apparently the Chief was really moved by what you said."

"I didn't say anything! That was all Fishlegs!"

"Oh Fishlegs told us, sure! But you gave Stoick your shield after all that."

"I'm a member of his army, and a loyal soldier!"

"And you loved his son!"

Gods above, the woman sounded sick in the head. Delusional. Astrid froze, a biting, frustrated rejoinder on the tip of her tongue. She couldn't deny it now, any more than she could have at the trial. Damn Fishlegs! Damn him! She hoped Fenrir would tear him limb from limb. She smiled a little too sweetly. "You don't happen to know where Fishlegs is right now, do you?"

Iona turned out to be a little smarter than Astrid had thought. "Don't you go about doing him any harm now, Astrid! I know it can't be a comfortable subject, but Stoick was going to exile you. We're all glad for you. Well maybe not glad, butâ€œ sympathetic?"

"What may or may not have happened between me and Hiccup Haddock is not Berk's business!"

Iona was looking hurt, and Astrid felt a stab of guilt. "I don't know why you're so upset. No one thinks worse of you for it. Hiccup may have beenâ€œ Hiccup. But he seemed nice."

Astrid glowered.

"And everyone's wondering how you got back to Berk."

"â€œA raft." She said shortly. The cook seemed to finally get the message, as she gave Astrid an awkward wave and slipped away through the buildings. Astrid watched her vanish, then stared blankly into space for a moment. She tried to remember as much as she could about Hiccup Haddock. A nasal, sarcastic voice. Scrawny, bony awkwardness. Green eyes and auburn hair. Those last two bits would have been alright, perhapsâ€œ on someone else. Someone taller, for starters. Of far more importance was the secrets he had uncovered, and what they meant for Berk. She wondered whether or not he was still alive, and how thorough an appropriate pounding would be, if he ever came back.

Her thoughts were shunted sideways by the sight of blond hair, chubby cheeks, and a light brown tunic.

She smirked, _Fishlegsâ€œ_

* * *

><p>Fishlegs' morning had been rather calm thus far. He did his usual rounds, checking the village's defenses, making sure the net traps and catapults were loaded, and had ample extra ammunition. He counted

the village's rations and made a note to the hunters to look for new berry patches while they were out. Their grain supply would last, but it was a little low. Perhaps it was time to think about building another farm out beyond Silent Sven's property. Thankfully grain was not high on the list of dragon's dietary needs. The farm would need little defending.<p>

His final stop was at the lumber mill. The stone structure powered by Hiccup's specially designed waterwheel. Their repair supplies were getting low again. He would have to put a work party together to cut more lumber.

He was walking slowly along the winding, riverside path back down towards the village when something hard and bony collided with the side of his jaw. He tumbled down the side of the steep incline into the gulley, and rolled to a halt on the riverbank, groaning. Leaves slithered and cascaded down the bank and a pair of shapely legs with feet in fur boots appeared in his narrow field of vision.

The sole of a boot pressed his face down into the thick riverside mud. He felt the cool sharpness of an axe blade at his throat.

"Fancy meeting you here, Fishlegs."

Ah. Astrid. He should have expected this.

"Listen," he said, his voice muffled and squeaky as his head sank further into the muck. "I know you might be a little upsetâ€|"

"Upset? No. I'm just curious." The woman said lightly. "Do you think a grown man can drown in just a few inches of water?"

The foul-smelling slime which graced all riverbeds was slowly oozing up his nose and into his mouth. The foot increased its pressure a little, and he found his face completely submerged. He tried to yell, but it came out as bubbles, and the moment his mouth opened more water flowed in, making him gurgle. He grasped impotently at her boot, and she released him. He rolled onto his back, coughing and sputtering, and staring gratefully up at the cloudy grey sky.

Blonde hair and angry eyes blocked his vision. "You lied about me."

"I saved you." He replied.

"Really? People think I'm pathetic now. That I'm some love-struck mourning maiden."

"Would you prefer perhaps being known as a cowardly thief?"

She lifted her axe threateningly. "I want people to know that I'm a proud, honest warrior."

"You saw what was happening in that room, Astrid. You were there just like me. There was a lot more at stake than just your image. That entire raid was a disaster. While you were missing, people were starting to question Stoick's leadership. Berk was going to pieces. Have you ever heard the saying a lie can travel around the world

before the truth can get its boots on?"

"That doesn't condone lying, Fishlegs!"

"Yeah, well, we needed speed. We needed to extinguish this fire before it started, or there would be no stopping it. All of Berk's problems were surfacing in that trial, and now? Now Stoick is still in charge. The factions that don't trust him trust you. You've got support from both sides, and the village is as united as it has been in years. For your part, everyone thinks very highly of you, and people like Snotlout will be shamed and booed if they don't stop hounding you for marriage, which is something you didn't want anyway. All you had to do was declare your undying love for a ghost. Everyone wins."

"Hiccup Haddock is not a ghost! Didn't we just discover this?"

"Oh, please," Fishlegs laughed, "Hiccup is gone, Astrid. If he was going to come back he would have done it by now. He's out of the picture."

"I don't like being stuck supporting your damned lies! I don't care how much you think they helped. If people are going to think highly of me it will be because I'm good at what I do! Not because of some damned lie I'm helping you keep!"

Fishlegs sat up, propping himself up on his arms. "I'm sure you have a few of your own."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Bucket was saying just this morning how he was out fishing near the sea stacks yesterday and saw a woman riding a Deadly Nadder to Raven Point."

Astrid glared at him, breathing heavily through her nostrils.

"It's a good thing people don't listen too hard to anything Bucket says. Isn't it?" Fishlegs asked. She nodded carefully, chewing her lip.

"Hiccup's journal is gone isn't it?"

She nodded again, axe hanging at her side.

"Good thing I copied it, then." Fishlegs said, rising to his feet and wiping away some of the mud. "I am honestly sorry for what I did during the trial, Astrid. But there was little time, no options, and way too much riding on the outcome."

"You owe me now." She said. "You screwed me over, ruined my image, and now I'm left holding your baggage. This doesn't happen again. Understand?"

"I understand." Fishlegs replied. His eyes lit up with sudden enthusiasm. "Are you going to show me the uh-huh raftâ€| you rode-sorry- sailed back to Berk on?"

"One day. When I trust you again. Right now I'm tempted simply to tell my â€|raftâ€| to eat you."

He raised both hands. "Alright, alright. I'm sorry I asked. I still think it was the right call. I don't think it'll cripple Berk. Depending on what Stoick does, it could just be the best thing to happen to us."

"What do you mean?" she asked carefully.

"Think ahead." He challenged. "Stoick is getting on. He'll be looking for a replacement soon. In another ten years, perhaps."

"Oh, no—"

"When you declared your feelings for Hiccup—"

"I didn't—" she snarled.

"You gave Stoick your shield, not me! You volunteered to be his defacto daughter-in-law. If he accepts, then that puts you in contention with Snotlout for Chieftainship!"

"I don't want to run Berk!" she shouted in a shrill voice. A few birds burst from a nearby tree, frightened by the noise.

"Who else is there? Snotlout's next if we don't do something, and you saw how bad he was when he took over teaching your class. Well maybe you didn't; you weren't hereâ€|"

Astrid froze. "He did w_hat?—"

"Oops," said Fishlegs in an utterly deliberate voice. "Did I say too much?"

But the woman was already running. Her last words were shouted, and carried to him on the autumn breeze. "This is not over, Fishlegs!"

* * *

><p>Snotlout paced back and forth across the floor of the arena. His hands were held officially behind his back. Tuffnut was there as well, grinning widely. Before them, lined up in neat little rows, was Astrid's class.</p>

"Alright, Recruits." He barked, "I know that somehow Astrid is back-stop cheering! That doesn't change a thing! I took over the responsibility of teaching the next generation of Berk's warriors, and I will gladly and nobly continue to do my duty! One day, if you pass my tests, you might have the honor of fighting alongside me as a member of my loyal Snotmen."

"What a great name!" Tuffnut supplied.

"Why thank you, Tuffnut." Snotlout said, "It's nice to see that some of us have good taste." He turned back to his class. "You are standing upon hallowed ground. Not only have generations of Berk's best warriors been trained here, not only have hundreds of dragons died here, but I â€"Snotlout the Dragonslayer, Future Chief of Berk, was trained here." He turned on his heel and glared at them. "So show some respect!"

His class straightened up.

"Remember, when I teach you, you aren't just warriors, you're Snot Drops!"

"Eww!" Exclaimed young Hallfrid Hallkelson. The rest of her class agreed, though they kept their silence.

"Not Eww!" Snotlout shot back, glaring daggers at the little girl.
"Not Eww! That's a proper honorable title!"

"Where's Astrid?" Hallfrid's brother Osmand demanded.

"We want Astrid!" the murmur passed through the rest of the class.
"Where's Astrid? We want Astrid! We want Astrid! We want Astrid!" the chant grew in strength despite Snotlout's repeated attempts at shushing them.

Finally he snapped. "Quiet! All of you shut up! Stop whining!"

The children fell silent, wide-eyed with shock.

Snotlout glared at them, red-faced. "You all want Astrid? That's too bad. I took over! I'm teaching you now! No more wooden dragon heads on a stick! You're Vikings! Back when I was trained, we were put in the ring against real dragons!"

"Wasn't it your cousin Sluglout who got killed?" Fridleif Finnason asked. Fridleif, at fourteen winters, was the eldest of Astrid's class.

"He died a true Viking!" Snotlout declared solemnly, putting a hand over his heart. "Now, all of you, get ready. You learned what you could from Astrid, but you're with the Master now! You're a Snot Drop, and we learn by doing!"

Astrid's students hefted their weapons uncertainly as Snotlout sauntered over to the nearest lever. He gripped it with both hands and pulled, yelling, "Let's hear our battle cry! Snotlout! Snotlout! Oi oi oi!" No one else joined in.

"Oh, man! This is going to be so awesome!" Exclaimed Tuffnut. "Total destruction!"

The door flew open and an angry Gronkle charged onto the battlefield.

"Okay, everyone stay calm." Snotlout cried, ducking as the creature swung its tail at him. The Gronkle focused on Tuffnut and spat out an enormous gob of molten rock, forcing the gangly Viking to dive for cover.

"Don't be afraid! I'll save you!" Snotlout drew his sword. The sound caught the Gronkle's sensitive ears, and it snarled at him. He let out a battle cry and tried to plant the sword in its flank. Yet the dragon's tough skin turn the blade aside, leaving what amounted to little more than a scratch. Its thrashing tail caught him across his enormous shoulders and sent him pinwheeling into a pile of boxes.

The children immediately scattered for their shields as Astrid had taught them. Under the instructions of Fridleif and the older students, they found cover behind various crates and barrels scattered throughout the arena. The younger children began to bang on their shields, filling the arena with clanging noise. The Gronkle grew unsteady, growling in confusion and waving its head back and forth, trying to sort out the noise.

The students began to move from cover to cover as the Gronkle circled, staying out of its sight. Meanwhile the oldest students, wielding spears and axes, crept up from behind.

"Take its wings!" Shouted Fridleif. They moved as a unit. Followed by three others, he leapt at the creature and swung an axe at its oscillating wings. The blade buried itself deep in the dragon's bone. Blood spurted down the axe haft. The Gronkle let out a cry of agony, and a gout of molten rock. On its other side, two more of Astrid's students took its other wing off completely, and it crashed to the ground, yowling. The enormous bulb on the end of its waving tail caught Fridleif in the gut and sent him tumbling away. When he landed, he curled up into a ball with his arms clutching his stomach, and began to scream in pain.

The older students leapt backwards to avoid the bludgeon-like tail, and one of them, a twelve-year-old boy named Brynjolf Barrason stepped into its field of view. The dragon belched out a sphere of molten rock which caught the youth in the chest. Whether due to the extreme heat, or the crushing weight of the projectile, he died almost instantly, but the red-hot, flaming ball bounced and tumbled across the arena and smashed a crate which little Hallfrid Hallkelson was hiding behind. The young girl screamed in fear as the raging dragon thundered towards her, slitted yellow eyes narrowed and gobs of spittle flying from its gnashing yellow teeth. Osmand, her younger brother, yelled her name from across the arena and charged from cover, waving his tiny axe.

The bleeding monster crashed through the broken crate, jaws clamping shut on empty air. His prey had been scooped up a second before, and was safely in Tuffnut's arms as the gangly Viking sprinted across the arena, his long legs pumping to get her safely out of the way.

The beast turned towards eight-year-old Osmand Hallkelson, who stood exposed in the center of the arena. The boy had slid to a halt upon finding himself face to face with the angry Gronkle. The beast growled and opened its mouth, gathering more lava for a third shot.

Thwock! An axe buried itself deep in the creature's skull. Jerking and twitching, the Gronkle slumped to the side. Lava began flowing slowly from its open mouth onto the floor of the arena.

An angry call rang out from the arena's entrance. "What in Odin's name is going on here?"

The children fell silent. Astrid was standing in the doorway, hunched slightly, breathing hard, and moving as fast her aching muscles would allow. Despite the physical woes, her eyes were blazing with the same recognizable cold blue intensity.

Her gaze traveled from the dying Gronkle, to the open cage, to

Fridleif Finnason, clutching his stomach and weeping in pain, to the crumpled black remains of Brynjolf, to Osmand, then to Tuffnut who was still clutching Hallfrid protectively in his arms. She finally settled on Snoutlout Jorgenson, who was leaning up against a crate, rubbing his shoulder and flexing his arm.

Astrid smiled a smile which was a little too bright, and said in a voice which was a little too cheerful, "Hello, Snoutlout. What are you doing in my arena?"

"Teaching these kids what it means to be a Viking!" he declared.

"Oh, I see. That makes perfect sense." Astrid nodded understandingly, her sweetness undercut by the ferocity with which she retrieved her axe from the Gronckle's skull.

"Yeah." Snoutlout agreed uncertainly. "It does. Perfect sense."

"There's a problem, Snoutlout. You see, these are my kids. They're ready to face a real dragon when I say so. Not before. I'm sure you understand."

"Yeah wellâ€¢ you were dead, sooo." He shot back, sheathing his unbloodied sword.

Astrid's smile remained as she stood in the center of the arena, focused entirely on the arrogant Viking warrior. She asked, "Do I look dead to you?"

"I just remembered—" Tuffnut said, backing away from her and towards the arena entrance. He set down little Hallfrid, who was promptly embraced by her brother Osmand. Tuffnut blurted out, "I uh, I gotta go feed old uncle Mildew." and ran.

Snoutlout was not so intelligent. "Well we thought you were dead, and these kids need some proper instruction- arrrgh!" Astrid's axe landed in the crate behind him, taking with it a few wisps of his spiky hair, and a small chunk of his ear. "Ow! What the hell is your problem?"

"Snoutlout Jorgenson, get out of my arena before I cut off your cock and feed it to a Monstrous Nightmare!" She gave him a good kick in the ass, and tromped a few steps after him as he fled, tripping and cursing, from the arena.

"And don't you dare come back! EVER!" she screamed. Red-faced and puffing with fury, she turned to her class. She ignored everything about the blackened, crushed shape which was spread across the arena's floor. Especially the contorted fingers which were still gripping an axe. She couldn't look at Brynjolf's remains. Not yet.

Astrid attended to Fridleif first. The youth wasn't screaming anymore, but tears were pouring down his face. He was still curled up in a ball, and his breathing was ragged. His face was white with shock. She took his hand, and winced as he squeezed it in a tight grip. "Are you alright?"

"It hurts. It really hurts. Oh, Sleipnir's shit it hurts!"

"What hurts?"

"Everything!" the young moaned. "Help me! I can't breathe."

Astrid helped him uncurl, and pulled up his shirt. Several dark bruises were forming all over his lower chest. One of his ribs was clearly broken. She sat up and began handing out orders to the other children. In no time, a stretcher had been assembled and he had been laid carefully upon it. A runner had been sent for Stoick and the Goethi.

While they waited, the students filled her in on what had happened. She patted Fridleif on the shoulder. "You fought well today."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"When you're healed, I want you back in this class, helping me teach."

"Yes mam." Despite his obvious pain, the young man stuck his jaw out confidently.

"And during raids you're to be on the barricades with the other warriors." She added, smiling gently.

Despite his pain, Fridleif grinned.

The Goethi arrived shortly, with Astrid's messengers leading her by the hand. Her staff clanking against the stone floor of the arena. Behind her was Stoick, with a dozen of Berk's finest warriors. Snotlout was with him, looking woefully unhappy. The Goethi headed immediately for Fridleif. Her own apprentices went with her, applying herbs and poultices under the village elder's carefully written instructions. Stoick took all of five seconds to look over the carnage in the arena. He bellowed, "Snotlout, Astrid, to me. Everyone who doesn't have to be here, get out!"

The arena emptied. Fridleif was carried out on the children's makeshift stretcher, likely heading to the great hall for proper care. The rest of the children either accompanied him, or headed home, escorted by Berk's warriors. Snotlout and Astrid stood before Stoick the Vast, shifting uncomfortably and glowering at one another.

Stoick crossed his arms and glared down at them. "Alright, you two, what happened here?"

"This idiot screwed up." Astrid fumed.

Snotlout took a rather more diplomatic tone. "Sir, I decided it would be best for a heavier hand to take over training the raw recruits. Someone with brains! Someone with brawn! Someone with the experience of a seasoned Viking warrior!" he paused to flex his biceps. Stoick appeared unimpressed by the display.

"All of those should rule you out, Snotlout!"

"Snotlout is a very accomplished warrior, Astrid." Stoick said

firmly.

"Hel yeah I am!" Snotlout declared.

"You go tell that to Brynjolf's mother!" Astrid said, jabbing her finger towards the blackened smear which used to be one of her students. "You arrogant, pig-faced, snot-nosed son of a troll!"

"I shouldn't have to take this kind of abuse!"

"Stoick, he took control of my class without permission and murdered one of the young ones!"

"Murdered? Bullshit! Accidents happen, Astrid!"

"That's right!" she snarled, tightening her grip on her axe,
"Accidents do happen, Snotlout."

Snotlout opened his mouth to reply, but Stoick grabbed him by the shoulder and pointed silently towards the arena entrance.

"I think it's time you went home and joined your father,
Snotlout."

Snotlout and Astrid exchanged death glares, and then he walked away, leaving her alone with Stoick the Vast.

"What happened to Brynjolf was unfortunate." Stoick said, "But it was not murder."

"He wasn't ready. None of them were. A seasoned warrior should have been able to recognize that. Snotlout is-"

"-Going to be Chief, Astrid."

"That's not a good thing, sir. Look into my eyes and tell me honestly that you'd follow him into battle."

Stoick did look her in the eyes, but when he opened his mouth, all he let out was a long sigh. He stroked his beard and turned away.

"Chief, I'm behind you one hundred percent. I always have been." She said loyally, "But that was Brenna Barrason's boy that died. You know that there's beenâ€| talkâ€| on the island. Some people are unhappy."

"I'm aware." Stoick said grimly.

"With all due respect sir, if Snotlout gets to be chief after this, it'll-"

"I know what it'll do, Astrid. I'm no fool."

"Well?"

Stoick turned away and strode over to Brynjolf's burnt, broken body. Rain was in the air, they could both smell it. Fog was moving in, and droplets of water were condensing on the iron cage above their heads, and gently pattering onto the carnage below.

"After Hiccup died, I got angry at Gobber." Stoick said quietly, staring down at the boy's remains. "I told him he hadn't trained the boy well enough. That he had spent too much time nursing Hiccup in the forge instead of teaching him how to be a Viking. I said a lot worse than that to him." He looked up at her, with grief in his eyes. "I regret it all, Astrid. Every word. But a chief can never apologize, and never step back. When he does he'll find nothing more than empty air to place his feet on, and he will fall. He questions himself, and everyone around him will question him too. I know what Snotlout's failings are, but he's decisive, and sure of himself."

"Sir—"

"More than that, Astrid. He's right about this." Stoick gestured at Brynjolf's body. "Keep these children alive in the kill ring as long as you want, but eventually some of them are going to die in the raids. Some of them already have. A soft touch here won't solve our problems out there. It won't save these children and it won't bring back my son. This will not stop until every single dragon is dead. Searching for the nest was the right call. It will always be the right call. It's the one Snotlout is willing to make. I know he won't bow to fear."

"He's also an idiot, sir. He gets people injured." She motioned down at the body. "He gets people killed."

"I know that."

"If he makes chief, Berk will tear itself apart."

Stoick nodded slowly, his face troubled. "I know that too."

A loud piercing wail of grief cut through the gentle rain. Brenna Barrason, Brynjolf's mother, was standing at the arena's barred entrance along with a dozen or so matrons from Berk's leading families. Brunhilda was there as well, drawing the sobbing woman into her comforting embrace.

Rain poured down her face and dripped off her chin as Astrid watched Brenna sag into her friends' arms. Word had spread, and the village itself, curious, had gathered in the stands above the arena. They stared down at Brynjolf's blackened body, at the dead Gronckle, and at Stoick and Astrid. On their faces, Astrid saw grief, anger, and discontentment.

"They won't follow Snotlout, sir. Their husbands and sons won't. I won't either."

"Do you have another option, Astrid?"

She opened her mouth, and shut it again. Then she looked down at young Brynjolf's body, and made a choice. A lie can travel around the world before the truth can get its boots on.

"I already gave you one, sir. I gave you my shield."

"Hiccup is gone, Astrid."

"Not toâ€¦not to us, sir." She said grimly. "You could buy me. Declare me your daughter-in-law. We both know it would stand up to our laws. The village would approve."

"And it would put you in line before Snotlout." Stoick stroked his beard. "That would anger the Jorgensons, Astrid."

"They know I'm capable, even if Snotlout's their champion. We both know I can do a better job than he can. And I won't split the village if I make Chief."

"And you? Are you sure you want to be a Haddock instead of a Hofferson?"

"You saw the sketch. I would have been anyway, if Hiccup had survived."

"Astrid, this is not how these negotiations are usually conducted."

"I'm sure you can sort it out formally later."

Stoick nodded. "True. And I can afford your bride price. But can your family afford a dowry?"

"I'll bring it myself, sir, I saw a few things while I was stranded out there. I know what causes the fog at Helheim's gate. I know how to keep the dragons off of our ships. I know how to end this. How's that for a dowry, Chief? I know how to get us to the Nest."

* * *

><p>Sorry for the delay. I've been working on other projects including my Fallout 3 story.

I'm also sorry there were no dragons in this chapter. This was about Berk and its people problems.

I've always thought Mildew was a Thorston, and that it was Ruff and Tuff's shameful family secret. He has the right helmet, afterall.

I said at the beginning of this story that Fishlegs was the character I was going to change the most, and I meant it. In the movies, he's nerdy and analytical. In the show, he's at times downright cowardly, and always played for comic relief. I'm trying to translate all of that into a more mature version of the character, making him very smart and extremely capable in certain ways. I have plans for where he ends up, and what he ends up doing by the end of the story, but I do recognize that he's more than a little OOC here. I hope that's alright with you guys.

The quote 'A lie can travel around the world' apparently came from Mark Twain. A writer I seriously doubt Fishlegs would have read. However it encompassed the themes and ideas explored in this chapter far too nicely for me to resist putting it in. My apologies if that bothers you.

Prodigal Son 22

Alexandria was burning. Smoke billowed upwards in great purple clouds. Fires ravaged the docks, and swept through the marketplace. The streets were crawling with panicked crowds, and the sounds of their screaming carried far out to sea. Hundreds of Saracen troops poured into the city, moving from ship to ship to ship as the vast fleet unleashed its army on Alexandria.

Catapults were fired from the decks of the larger frigates, at anchor in the great harbor. The Pharos lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was being pelted again and again with enormous rocks. Nearly a hundred members of the city guard were holed up inside, trying to stay alive even as wave after wave of moorish pirate crashed upon their defenses and were again and again driven off.

The fort's skeletal garrison had been slaughtered almost immediately. Traitors in the Alexandrian ranks had opened the doors of the city's fort, allowing the Saracens to enter at will and slaughter the defenders.

The Saracen fleet had blockaded the harbor first, intercepting and destroying the many ships which tried to flee. They had landed small armies both east and west of the city to catch and slaughter Alexandrians. On the west side of the city lay the necropolis. An enormous graveyard housing generations of citizens. Refugees fleeing from the eastern gate were cut down in the hundreds with blade, spear, and arrow, often bleeding out on the graves of their ancestors.

A few civilians had boats docked on Lake Mareotis to the south. Citizens commandeered as many vessels as they could find, often violently. They set sail for the southern shore, getting as far from the carnage as they could, but it was of no use. A fourth army of two thousand Saracen soldiers was waiting for them on the southern shoreline. The boats found themselves stranded with meager supplies at the center of the lake.

Those fleeing west out the Canopic gate had the best chance of survival, but it was still slim. Escape lay west and then north around the shore of the Mediterranean all the way up to Byzantium. They still had miles to go through Caliphate territory, and they would pass by Jerusalem, at that time a regional Arab stronghold.

A battle was raging in the city itself. The city guard, under Martius' command, had held out against the Saracen hordes. They floated burning barges into the harbor to slow the advancing fleet. Hundreds of able-bodied men joined their ranks, and they held the docks against three separate attacks, and a near constant hail of arrows.

A large number of Saracen troops had been called away from their assault on the lighthouse in order to cross the Heptastadion, the enormous man-made causeway which connected the city to Pharos Island, and flank Martius' forces. A great battle had taken place on the causeway itself, and soon both the water all round Alexandria was thick with blood and bodies as men were thrown from the dyke into the raging sea.

The Saracen fleet had been forced to retreat, and fire balls of burning tar into the buildings. The flames drove the Alexandrian defenders several further into the city, giving the pirates room to land, and from the moment they did, they cut a steady, bloody swath through the city, house by house and street by street.

Temples and shops were looted and burned as they passed. Block by block the defending Alexandrians were driven backwards. In the narrower streets, what few families hadn't fled poured boiling oil from their windows onto the attacking army. The defenders fought with swords, shields and spears, but also with butcher knives, scythes, rakes, shovels, and all manner of heavy clubs. Carts were driven into alleyways, and planted across the wider streets forming barricades from which defenders pelted the attacking soldiers with stones, and held strong against their charges again and again. The blood and sweat and dust covered every man and obscured much of the city until neither side could tell the other apart. Chaos and confusion reigned.

Many of the weak, the young, and the infirm had taken shelter in the closest thing the city had to a fortress: the library of Alexandria. With its large courtyard, thick stone walls, heavy wooden gate, and sturdy roof, it would withstand a siege. Food was collected there, as were blankets and other supplies, and as the defenders were slowly pushed back, more and more people looked to the Library for safety.

* * *

><p>Above it all, Hiccup and Toothless circled, trying to find the best way to help. The dragon had already expended his plasma blasts harrying the Saracen fleet and starting a few devastating fires of his own. A firestorm out five hundred meters from the harbor had cut the attacking armada's strength down nearly a fifth. But it wasn't enough.</p>

The pair moved from barricade to barricade, swooping down on an attacking enemy squad and driving them off.

"Toothless!" Hiccup pointed, seeing a dark patch of Saracens bearing down on a large and scarcely defended barricade. The street beyond was clear of obstacles, and would give the Saracens a straight shot into the Jewish quarters.

"C'mon, Bud!"

The swooped down as the Saracens charged up the barricade. Their line had reached the top and were grappling with Alexandrian citizens when Hiccup and Toothless crashed into the fray. The impact knocked the front row of soldiers back down to the bottom of the barricade. Toothless landed on a group of Saracens, tail swinging and jaws gnashing furiously. He tore them all apart. Hiccup leapt off of his dragon and took up a thin scimitar from one of the fallen soldiers. He parried a blow from a masked attacker and kicked the man in the balls, at which point Toothless took over.

A young citizen, no more than twelve years old was lying on the cobbles, covering his head as a Saracen pirate prepared a killing blow. Hiccup ran forward and thrust his scimitar into the man's guts,

splitting him open. "I'm terribly sorry." Hiccup said as the man curled up and tried to gather his innards, "Does your Caliph allow sick days? Because this really should have been one of those!"

Toothless shot him a dry look.

"What? That was totally an inspirational battle cry."

The Saracens had backed off, and were forming a pike line, preparing to charge the beast.

"Uhh! Bud, you got any fire left?"

At that very moment a hail of stones poured from the top of the barricade and struck the line of pikemen, killing several and scattering their lines. Alexandrians poured over their defenses, wielding all manner of weaponry and charged the Saracen lines, chasing the soldiers away.

"You!" a voice called out. Hiccup turned to see an olive-skinned Arabian with a patchy black beard waving a crossbow at him. The man said, "I know you!"

"Are you sure now's the best time for a chat?" Hiccup demanded, mounting Toothless.

"My name is Ali Murat Yahya Attar! You stole baskets of fish from my shop!"

"And what?" Hiccup demanded, staring at the man's crossbow. "You're going to shoot me for it?"

"No!" the shopkeeper let his arrow fly. It went wide of Toothless and hit a Saracen soldier who had been creeping up on the duo. The shopkeeper rushed forward and scooped up the young boy whom Hiccup had protected. "Thank you for saving my son!"

"Oh, well then, all in a day's work." Hiccup said proudly. Beneath him, Toothless let out an exasperated grumble.

"Oh, shut up, Bud. Let's get going."

"A group of people have gathered at the Library!" the Shopkeeper called out. "We're going there when we can."

"Give me your son. I'll take him there now!"

The shopkeeper kissed his son on the forehead and placed him in Hiccup's waiting arms. The kid whimpered, frightened both of Toothless, and of the spindly leatherclad stranger. Hiccup pulled off his helmet and smiled down at the child. "Hi. What's your name?"

"Aden. I'm scared. I don't want to fly!"

"Nice to meet you, Aden. Have you ever gone sailing?" he nudged Toothless, and the dragon spread his wings out, each tip nearly brushing against the buildings on either side of the street. The crowd backed away.

"Yeah!" the child said cautiously. "Me and my dad did on weekends."

Hiccup unhooked his safety harness and passed it through the child's belt before hooking it up again. "Well flying is a lot like that. But you can go up and down as well."

"Sure!" the boy hazarded, pulling on the safety straps to test them. "Is this so we don't fall off?"

Hiccup grinned. "Not unless you want to. Just shut your eyes and tell me about your favorite spot in Alexandria."

With that, Toothless took off, wings beating rapidly as they lifted away from the barricade and soared over the streets towards the Library. Sitting in his lap, Aden whimpered and snuggled a little closer to Hiccup's chest.

"Is my dad going to be alright?"

"He seems like a strong man." They caught an updraft, and the city shrank beneath them. Hiccup thought of his own father, Stoick, and how utterly invincible the man had always seemed. He wondered whether Aden viewed his own father in the same light, held him up on the same pedestal as Hiccup had when he was younger.

He watched another barricade collapse in the city below, opening up the north-eastern section of the city to the invaders. Hordes of Saracen soldiers poured through, and with a sinking feeling he realized that the barricade he had just saved was going to be surrounded shortly. He noticed Aden leaning out to take a look, and steered Toothless in such a way as to hide the sight.

"Are we going to win?" Aden asked. His face was ashen, and he was trembling. Whether it was fear of the war, or fear of the dragon, Hiccup didn't know.

"I hope so." Not for the first time, Hiccup wondered where his friends were. He thought of Yanick Erwan, the tough old ex-slave. Had the man known about the Pandev's betrayal? Where was he? Was he safe? More importantly, where was Artemisia?

Odin's missing eye, this hurt! During his time in the Varangian guard, Hiccup had seen his share of battles, big and small, but never in a place which he valued so much. The faces of the dead seemed to stare up at him from street-level. The same faces he had walked by every day. Alexandria was dying all around him.

The Library was still standing, though the hordes were drawing steadily closer to it. Street by street, and alley by alley. Fighter by fighter. Hiccup circled the wide courtyard once. Hundreds of people were gathered there. Mothers and children, wounded soldiers, innocents, all of them trapped.

"Hold on to me, Aden." He prompted. The boy obeyed wordlessly, and they began a steep descent. Aden screamed, unfamiliar with the falling sensation to which Hiccup had long since grown numb. They landed in front of Prometheus' statue with a jarring thud, and sent the refugees scattering throughout the courtyard. Hiccup unstrapped

the boy as quickly as he could. All around him he could hear cries of fear. The few soldiers inside the fort ran forward, brandishing swords and gripping their shields tightly.

With the safety harnesses loose, Hiccup pulled the young boy to his shoulder so they all could see him. "Who's in charge here?"

"Leave us alone, demon!" a soldier called out as the troop crept closer.

"There's the warm, friendly greeting I've come to expect." Hiccup said. Toothless growled an affirmation of his own, sensing the Alexandrian's hostility.

"Form up!" A harsh yet familiar voice barked. The soldiers obeyed, forming a shield wall between the dragon and the civilians. "Don't be afraid, men! God is with you!" A figure in blood-stained armor stepped out of the line. He stood alone, facing Hiccup and Toothless. "Let that child go, demon! I already have too much on my plate, but I'll find a way to fit you in somehow!"

Hiccup smiled. "Hello Captain Martius. How goes your day?"

"You know my name, devil. It doesn't matter. You let that child go or dragon or not, I'll kill you."

"Are you kidding?" Hiccup growled in exasperation and tore off his helmet. "It's me! I'm on your side!"

Martius straightened, lowering his shield by a fraction. Hiccup let Aden go, and the young boy sprinted for safety behind the soldiers, clearly frightened by the ordeal of the flight.

"Boy," the guard captain said coldly, "You have ten seconds to explain this."

"Stop this at once, Martius, you ridiculous cow!" a woman's commanding voice echoed sharply across the courtyard. Artemisia, standing tall with her carefully arranged hair and immaculate white robe. She planted her hands on her hips. "Hiccup!"

"Artemisia!" He slid off of Toothless and hurried forward to embrace her. The dragon bounded up behind him them with wide eyes and a gummy grin. The soldiers backed away uncertainly. Then Martius arrived and pried them apart.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"Hiccup trained a dragon and now he's here to help us." Artemisia said shortly. "Can you handle that or not?"

Martius looked from her to Hiccup to Toothless and back. The Dragon was beginning to nose his way towards a group of young children who were gathered at the foot of the library's broad stairwell. Hiccup gave him a light kick to set him back on track. The dragon retreated and sat obediently beside him, but the moment Hiccup relaxed, Toothless batted him in the head with his tail.

"Where have you been the past day, boy?" Martius said finally. "We could have used a dragon this morning when the Saracens showed up on

our doorsteps."

"I was at Byzantium, talking to Emperor Leo."

Both of their faces lit up. "What did he say?" Artemisia demanded.

Martius was a little more reserved. "When is the fleet coming? How long do we have to hold out?"

Hiccup glanced around at the courtyard, and all the hopeful, desperate faces. He said, "We should talk inside."

Artemisia led the way into the Library. Toothless followed with a steady gait, head swinging from side to side as he watched the refugees. Once inside, she closed the door and leaned against it. "Well?"

Hiccup bit his lip and looked down at his feet. "They're not coming." He mumbled. "The Emperor sold us out to keep the Silk Road open."

"That whoreson!" Martius turned away and rammed a fist into the nearest pillar. "That treacherous pig!"

Artemisia said. "Of course he did. Byzantium's economy depends on the Silk Road."

"Go tell that to everyone dying out there!" Martius snarled. "This is our fucking city, Artemisia, and you're saying he did the right thing?"

"I didn't say that." She shot back.

"If it's any consolation, Toothless and I ruined his dinner."

"Well that just makes everything okay." The guard captain spat furiously.

"Hey! It looked expensive!" Hiccup replied defensively, "And we left it full of broken glass. He couldn't eat it."

The guard captain turned away and offered God a silent prayer. Artemisia was frowning. "Well if we're on our own, how effective a defense can we mount?"

"I don't have the men!" Martius responded, his voice hoarse. "We can hold out here as long as supplies last, but—"

The door slammed open and a courier stepped through, panting heavily and leaning on his knees for support. "Sir, they've broken through the barricade at Copriae!"

"Damn and blast!" Martius hefted his sword and shield. "Gather what men you can and meet me at the crossroads. We can't let them near the storehouses. Not until we've finished transporting the supplies back here." The courier vanished, and Martius made to follow. He stopped at the door and turned back to Hiccup. "You know how to use that sword?"

Hiccup stared down at the scimitar and nodded.

"Good. Because I need every man I can get." Martius said grimly.
"Let's see what you and your beast can do."

"Be careful." Artemisia called out, her brow furrowed with worry.

* * *

><p>The center of Alexandria was not falling easily. People fought hard and fiercely when their backs were against a wall. The surviving Alexandrian population had withdrawn to a few blocks radius of the Library, and piled everything they had in the street, creating a miniature fort. Those who weren't actively fighting were loading food and water from the nearby warehouse into the Library, which had become the center of the resistance.</p>

Except that a full division of the Saracens had broken through the eastern barricade, and their army was marching quickly towards the warehouses, intent on cutting off the resistance's supply lines. They met Martius' grim and ragged lines half a block from the warehouse itself. Each side was lined up in strict ranks at either side of the street, shields at the ready, spears levelled at the enemy. It had come down to this: a shield wall. One of the oldest infantry tactics in warfare.

Men stood shoulder to shoulder, each carrying a shield which guarded both himself and the man beside him. Two divisions pushed against each other, each trying to break the other's line. Victory came to whichever side held strong. Whichever side stood its ground. Chance really had no place in this sort of fight. The outcome rested upon the determination of either side. Whichever side gave in would be cut to ribbons. Hiccup had seen it before.

Hiccup had been in a shield wall once during his campaign in Bulgaria. He found it a thoroughly horrible experience. Battle always was, of course, but the shield wall was a special sort of hell all its own. The pressure and closeness of his fellow soldiers made it impossible to move, nearly impossible to breathe. The dust kicked up had obscured his vision. All he could feel was the sweat and blood and press of men around him. All he could hear was the clanging and roaring of both armies, and the screams of the dying. A savage Bulgar with hatred in his gaze had glared at Hiccup from across the shield wall, but neither of them could move at all, being forced instead to simply watch each other and push with all their might.

The armies -Varangian and Bulgarian- had held their ground for almost twenty minutes during which time Hiccup, a mere two feet from his enemies, couldn't even draw his sword. At some point in the battle the man at his right shoulder had died. Not of battle wounds, but of simple pressure. He had been crushed to death by the press of the soldiers behind him. When a gap opened in the line, he dropped to the ground, and no one stepped up to replace him; at the very start of battle a Bulgarian spear had gone through the eye of the man behind him. Even that tiny weak link was enough to break the chain in such a high-stakes contest. A shock ran through Hiccup's line as the Bulgarians gained a step. Then another, pushing the Varangians back. With a mighty effort, they broke the Varangian lines and forced their enemy into a retreat. The soldier Hiccup had been staring at for twenty minutes planted an axe in his chest as he passed.

Hiccup lay there dying for another hour, during which time the Varangians reformed their lines, broke the Bulgarian offensive, and routed their army. He could hear his comrades celebrating some distance away, but he couldn't call out, for the pain was too great. All he could do was stare at the sky deliriously until a black, winged shape scooped him up and flew him to a secluded fishing hut where he was nursed back to health by a local couple who had taken a shining to Toothless.

That was Hiccup's experience at Nessebar in Bulgaria. Here he was in Alexandria, about to undergo the same bloody baptism. Wellâ€¦ not quite. Martius, blood-stained and battered but still standing tall, had a better plan. "You ever been in a shield wall, kid?"

"Once."

"Then you know how to beat 'em. Use that dragon. Get behind them and tear them to fucking shreds! Every dead Saracen makes it likelier that we get out of this mess so leave none alive."

The two armies charged down the street and crashed into each other in a forceful collision which rattled teeth and broke bones. The grunts and cries of each side rose as they dug in their heels. The front ranks did the best they could with swords and knives and axes, trying to hit the man on the other side of the shield wall. Several fighters on both sides were killed instantly, run clean through by a spear, or in one case killed on impact as both sides slammed together.

Behind them, Hiccup mounted Toothless and patted him on the head. The dragon's breathing was ragged and he was starting to whine. Hiccup knew why: the dragon was tired and hungry. So was he, for that matter. They had flown from Alexandria to Barqah to rescue Neptune's Pride, from Barqah overnight to Byzantium, and then from Byzantium back to Alexandria only to start fighting again. The battle brothers had had a worse time when they were stranded behind Saracen lines in the Iberian Peninsula, but at that moment they were both tuckered out.

"I know you're tired, bud. But we have to get this done or we lose the city."

A fighter in the defender's crowd screamed as he was slowly pushed backwards onto the sword of the man behind him, neither of them able to move out of the way for the press of people was too great.

Hiccup pulled out his scimitar and said, "Alright, bud. One last time. A low glide. Let's see how badly they scare."

Toothless growled, spread his wings and took off. They gained a bit of height, rising to the tops of the buildings, and then gliding over the embattled forces. As he passed, Toothless let out a loud roar. The Alexandrians, knowing the dragon was on their side, were heartened. Many of the Saracens looked up and cried out in fear. Several soldiers at the back of their division, ones who had seen the dragon in action on the open ocean, fled at the sight.

Hiccup let them run; his objective was to break the Saracen

formation. He landed a good fifteen meters behind the crowd, and watched the back ranks, under the orders of their sergeants, cease their forward push and turn around to confront him. The Saracen division as a whole was pushed back a foot, but they dug in their heels and held.

"You have another shot in you, bud?" Hiccup asked as two ranks of Saracen soldiers, a few dozen in total, advanced on them. Enough time had passed; a few hours since Toothless had run dry. The dragon opened his mouth and fired a weak shot into the advancing ranks. It was at half-strength- a consequence of the dragon's fatigue- but even that was enough. The blue-white fire burned straight through two advancing Saracen soldiers and detonated in the midst of the struggling Saracen division. Armour, weapons and burned limbs were blown upwards, bouncing off the walls of the narrow street. Saracen fighters who weren't killed in the explosion were knocked sideways, stumbling and falling to the ground. The Alexandrian division pushed easily through the broken shield wall, slaughtering any living Saracen they passed as they moved down the street. The remaining Saracens turned, fleeing towards Hiccup and Toothless, and knocking over their own rear guard to get away. Toothless spread his wings and leapt straight forward, bearing six men to the ground. The Night fury thrashed and bit and clawed them all to pieces. His tail crushed a fleeing man against the nearest wall.

Three Saracen spearmen were approaching the occupied dragon, weapons at the ready. Determined to protect his friend, Hiccup charged at them. He bashed the closest with his shield and knocking the man over. He whipped his scimitar across the fallen soldier's throat and moved on to the next, who had turned to confront him.

The man thrust his spear at Hiccup, who only just managed to raise his shield in time. The spearpoint skittered across the Gronckle iron and left a long, shallow cut across Hiccup's cheekbone towards his ear. Spears worked great in formations, where one division of men moved together and sought to utterly destroy another. However spears were somewhat risky in one-on-one engagements, as once a man committed to a spear thrust, recovery was difficult. This was a fact Hiccup knew and took full advantage of.

Despite the fact that half of his face was on fire, he stepped forward and swung his shield up under the man's arms, knocking the spear from his grasp, and leaving him open. Hiccup ran his scimitar along the man's belly, and finished him with a third strike across his neck, severing his head.

The third spearman moved on Hiccup while he was occupied, and it was only blind luck which saved the young viking's life. Hiccup happened to shift his hip during his last stroke, and where the spear would have caught him in the belly, instead it scraped along the side of his thick leather belt and knocked him over. The young Viking locked his arm around the spear's shaft, trapping his opponent's only weapon. The two of them tugged back and forth for three heart-pounding seconds before Martius arrived with his Alexandrian fighters. The captain ran the Saracen clean through with his sword and kicked the dying man to the ground, where he finished him with the edge of his shield.

"Hiccup! You alright?"

"Owâ€|" Hiccup pushed himself into a sitting position and quickly undid the straps holding his leather armour together. He slipped a hand underneath his armour and felt his side for blood, but didn't find any; the Spear hadn't penetrated past the belt. He let out a long relieved sigh and stared up at the blood-stained captain.

Martius turned to his advancing division. "I want that Barricade back! Go get it for me!" his men let out a cheer and charged down the street.

"You Danes are a hearty lot." Martius observed, turning back to Hiccup. "Damned glad you're on our side."

Toothless appeared at Hiccup's side, sniffing at his wounded cheek and growling ferociously. Fueled by anger, the dragon leapt, batting his wings to gain extra height. He scrambled onto a balcony and began firing small plasma blasts at the retreating Saracen soldiers, hitting a few in the back as they ran. Toothless raised his bloody head skywards and roared in triumph. It was a sound heard as far away as the docks, and gave terrified pause to Saracen fighters across the city.

"He's really tired." Hiccup said as Martius helped him to his feet. "And so am I. I haven't slept since we talked at Artemisia's."

"You've done enough for now." Martius said. "Go take a few hours. I think there's some salted meat in the Library's store rooms."

"Thanks." Hiccup waved Toothless down and the dragon landed beside him. Toothless gave the Saracen corpses a thorough examination, and then lumbered towards Martius, who tensed up.

"Don't worry." Hiccup called out. "He knows you're friendly."

"Sure it does." The captain said. Toothless licked his hand softly and then burbled and wrapped himself around the guard captain.

"Whoa, what's happening, kid? I don't like this!"

"He's thanking you."

"For what?" Martius asked as Toothless crooned and nuzzled him.

Hiccup pointed at the third spearman. "For saving my life."

"You're welcome, beast. Now get off me!" Martius shoved Toothless away and Hiccup moved forward to calm the dragon.

"Eat and rest. By nightfall I need both of you battle-ready."

"Yes sir." Hiccup saluted and pointed Toothless back towards the library.

* * *

><p>They managed to find a barrel of salted fish, which Toothless devoured hungrily. No one dared to stop the dragon as he moved around the courtyard, sniffing at various resting civilians, and following wherever his curious nose led him. Hiccup followed behind at a steady gait, dipping bread in a bowl of stew a grateful woman had offered him. Several fearless children ran behind Toothless, trying to keep up with the dragon, giggling and laughing as Toothless spun around and licked them all in turn, sniffing at them and nipping playfully at their heels as they ran around him. The dragon's green eyes had grown big and round</p>

"C'mon, bud." Hiccup called out after he had finished his stew and returned the bowl. Toothless turned and followed him reluctantly up the library steps and into the building. The first floor was taken up with the wounded. Red blood stained white marble and soaked the carpets. The cries of the wounded echoed throughout the building, somewhat hushed by the multitudes of paper scrolls. Women and children bearing salves and poultices moved from figure to prone figure, offering what help they could.

Hiccup found Artemisia on the second floor. She had set up a small desk, and was directing the library's scribes, sending them out on various tasks such as stocking the lower rooms with food and water in preparation for the expected siege, but she took a few minutes to lead Hiccup and Toothless to a secluded wing where she sat her protÃ©gÃ© down on a bench and cleaned up his cheek. Toothless curled up between them and went straight to sleep.

"It'll leave a scar." Artemisia told him as she wiped the blood away and rinsed her cloth in a bucket of water.

Hiccup smiled grimly, an old memory bubbling to the surface. "Yeah. It's only fun if you get a scar out of it."

Artemisia chuckled quietly. "Who told you that?"

"Long story." Hiccup took a bandage and pressed it to his cheek, feeling the blood soak through.

The woman sat back and laid her hands on her knees. Her white dress was torn in several places, and had blood spatters all over it, but she carried herself with dignity enough regardless. She said, "You rescued Neptune's Pride."

"Yep."

"They arrived about six hours before the Saracen fleet did. They gave Martius enough warning that he was able to set up a meaningful defense."

"I'm glad."

"His own men turned on him first. The Caliphate had paid off half of his own guards. Martius had to cut his way out of his office to get to the barricades."

"He's a brave man."

She nodded. "I just wanted you to know that you were right to go after the ship first."

"Thank you."

"I've got something for you." She rose and disappeared for a few seconds, only to return lugging a dozen cylindrical containers of the sort used by couriers. Hiccup frowned, eyeing them up. They were made from thin, hollowed out birch tree trunks. They had been treated with oils and sealed with a sap rim. The containers were sturdy and weatherproofed to the very best ability of Alexandrian's artisans.

Artemisia set her load down and disappeared to retrieve another. Hiccup watched in silence, blinking with exhaustion. When she had her containers stacked in a neat pile, thirty in total, she said, "There are over seven-hundred thousand scrolls in this library. I've picked out the two hundred most important of them."

A deep sense of unease grew in the pit of Hiccup's stomach.

"Why?"

"I put in Euclid, Pythagoras, the writings of Cicero and Caesar, the best histories of the different ages of the world, the Iliad, the Aeneid, and the Odyssey, writings in several different fields of engineering, Aristotle's Poetics, and Plato's Republic. Observations and writings from the greatest artists, politicians, mathematicians, philosophers and historians our civilization has ever seen. This is the heart of the entire collection."

"Artemisia-"

"Shh." She said softly, waving a hand. "When the Saracens breach the courtyard-"

"If."

"When. This is a sturdy building, Hiccup, but it wasn't designed for the sort of fight the Saracens will give us. It is not a fortress."

"I don't think we should be making any assumptions here."

"Even if we drive off this army, the Caliphates can pull men from across Africa. Even if we hold the Library, the siege is going to turn into a war of attrition. One we can't win. Alexandria is lost, Hiccup. We have no support, limited supplies, and we're facing an endless army. It's only a matter of time."

He shook his head vigorously. "I don't want to hear this. Toothless and I should stay and fight! We should help save lives! I'm not going to just up and abandon you guys!"

Artemisia smiled sadly. "You're a good man, Hiccup Haddock, but this library-"

"I'm not interested in-"

"This is where I will die!" the woman said harshly. "I will die beside Martius on the steps of this building, holding out as long as I can, but it will all be for nothing if you don't hear me now, so you, Hiccup Haddock, You. Let. Me. Speak."

They stared at each other, each one defiant. She said, "This Library contains the collected knowledge of the Romans and the Greeks, and the scrolls beside you are the very foundations of that knowledge. Every single letter on every scroll was either inked by a great man himself, or else recounts their tales. Do remember Plato's parable of the cave? Because every scroll in here is the story of a man who broke his chains, stepped into the light, and did something incredible. Men who changed the world. These are the seeds of our city, of our civilization. Everything Alexandria is. Everything it represents is here in these two-hundred scrolls. This city has fallen, and this library will fall, but if we save but if fraction of this library survives, then our art, our history, our culture, survive. Alexandria survives even if its people are dead and gone.

"This is a larger battle, generations long. Reason has pushed back the darkness this far, and we have to fight to keep it from closing back in. All the math, all the science, all the history of the world is in this library, Hiccup. If it is destroyed our world falls into darkness and decay. I'm not asking you to betray us, Hiccup. Quite the opposite. I'm asking you to save us. I ask this of you not because I think you're a coward. Not because I think you wouldn't fight beside the rest of us to the last breath, but because you're the only one who can take the seeds of our civilization away from all of this war and violence and hatred and death. Take these scrolls and go home. Go back to Berk."

Hiccup was silent for a long time. Artemisia's pleas echoed in his ears as he sat on his bench, staring at the casks. Toothless' gentle breaths were warm against his feet, a great comfort to him.

"I might be able to fly some of the refugees out I can save a handful." He suggested.

"And drop them where, exactly? This entire region is boxed in." Artemisia said.

Artemisia was right. Hiccup had seen the size of the fleet, and the way it had stretched beyond the horizon. And he had arrived back in Alexandria to find that it was only a quarter of the Saracen army. That most of the invading forces had in fact arrived overland from across the Arab world to claim the last tiny patch of Byzantine ground. And they had done it with Byzantium's permission. There was no way to win.

He said, "Leo said that there was no idealism behind Alexandria. No science or philosophy. He believed this library was all just power and cynical politics."

"And what do you believe?"

"I think he's wrong." He let out a long breath, and shaking tears followed it, streaming freely down his face, being soaked up by the bandage. He looked at Artemisia and saw those same tears reflected in her eyes. An entire Civilization, entrusted to him. The weight of the responsibility was crushing, oppressive. And yet when his mind reached that impulse to run, to retreat, to backpedal and vanish, to shy away from his duty, he found that he couldn't. Not this time. Not if it meant losing this.

If he didn't act, it would mean not just the deaths of the refugees outside, but also the deaths of ancient Greece and ancient Rome. The death of science and philosophy. The death of all the ideals which had grown to mean so much to him. The same ideals he knew could save Berk.

He said, "Alright. I'll do it."

* * *

><p>He left that evening. He strapped the cylinders on Toothless' back behind the saddle, and under the dragon's belly. Toothless let out a mild groan of irritation, but the dragon had carried worse loads. They would be traveling more slowly, hopping up the coastline of Italy and across the empires of Europe before finally returning to the frigid north.</p>

Outside the nearby open window, the streets of Alexandria were glowing. Not with the lights of busy citizens, but with multitudes of blazing fires. The city was burning down, building by building. There would be nothing left but charred soil. He could hear the men at the barricades, and the laughter and chatter of the civilians in the courtyard.

Artemisia was standing there, silently, as he ran through his pre-flight checks. When he was done, he rose and turned to her, his face grim but determined.

"I'll take back Berk." He promised as he embraced her. "I'll save it and teach them everything you taught me."

"I'll hold you to that, if there's an afterlife." She replied, kissing him on the forehead. They stared out the window. Far above the city, Venus could be seen, shimmering between clouds of smoke.

"I guess I'll never find out what makes them turn." She said sadly.

"Someone will, someday." Hiccup said. "I mean that's what we're saving these scrolls for, right?"

She nodded silently.

Armor jingled behind them, and they both turned. Martius was marching up to them. "There you are, Hiccup. We could use that beast on the barricades!" his voice trailed off as he spotted the scrolls strapped to Toothless. He drew to a halt, and looked from the dragon to Hiccup, to Artemisia. He sighed and slowly pulled his helmet off, running a dirty hand across his close-shaven head, yet in the looks he shared with Artemisia there was only sadness, and understanding.

"I'm sorry, sir!" Hiccup managed to choke the words out.

Martius turned his gaze to Hiccup, and the scrolls strapped in tight bundles to Toothless' saddle. He smiled dryly. "She always told me that everything the human race ever learned was in this library. Kept telling me to read, but I can barely manage my way through a duty

roster."

Hiccup took a deep breath, fighting back his own tears. "I should stay and fight-

Martius shook his head. "Don't. Anyone who's still here at dawn tomorrow is going to die. I can't tell the men, or the refugees, but we can't hold. The city is already lost. Half our rations are spoiled, and the moment a flaming arrow makes it through one of those windows this entire building will go up in smoke. Alexandria is finished, Hiccup." He walked forward and slid an arm around his lover's waist. "Artemisia and I both knew that the moment you came back. Don't be guilty. Our civilization isn't in this city anymore. It's strapped to your saddlebags. Best to save it."

Hiccup nodded gratefully. "Thank you." He mounted Toothless, and the dragon crooned sadly, picking up on the emotions of everyone around him, but not fully understanding. Artemisia went down on one knee and wrapped her arms around the dragon's neck.

"Goodbye, Toothless. Take good care of Hiccup for me."

The dragon murmured a sad set of noises and licked the side of her face, trying to comfort her. Martius stepped forward and patted the beast on the snout. He said, "One day you and I might have got along, beast."

Toothless growled at him, but nuzzled his hand nonetheless.

"Farewell, Hiccup." Martius guided Artemisia back to her feet. Tears were streaming freely down her face.

"You too." Hiccup said. "Give the bastards a good thrashing for me."

Martius grinned. "Was planning on it."

"Do you still have my Astrolabe?" Artemisia asked.

"Yeah." Hiccup fished the disc out of his pocket and held it out for her.

"No." She shook her head. "You keep it. Remember: when you carry it, you carry all of us with you."

Hiccup nodded silently and pocketed the device. "I'll miss you guys."

"We'll miss you too." Artemisia replied.

"For as long as we're here." Martius added.

Hiccup patted Toothless on his broad black head and whispered, "Let's go, bud."

With that, the dragon crooned one last time. He turned and leapt out the window, spreading his wings to drift on the thermals, carrying his rider and their precious cargo safely and silently into the Arabian night.

Artemisia and Martius stood at the library window, watching the black shape until it vanished. She let out a long, long sigh. "This really is the last night, isn't it?"

"One of them." Martius said. He gently brushed a lock of hair from her face and kissed her tenderly on her temple. "I should have married you." He whispered.

She smiled and leaned into his embrace. "It would have caused too much trouble."

"Trouble found us anyway."

"True."

They fell silent for but a moment.

"There's a priest in the courtyard." She offered.

He chuckled, a pleasant and comforting sound to her ears. He said, "One last act of defiance then?"

Artemisia turned in his arms and kissed him full on the mouth, a slow gesture, full of passion, and promise. "Let's get married and damn them all to hell."

"Thought you said Hell didn't exist."

"I said it's unproven. But let's find out together."

* * *

><p>Shahira Pandev sat on the back end of her father's boat, whittling away on a piece of scrap wood. Her expression was sour, and her face was pale with guilt. Dawn had broken, revealing the vast column of smoke, moving north from Alexandria. Though it was miles away, she reckoned she could hear the screams carried on the wind, though perhaps it was just her imagination.</p>

"Shahira?" She heard her father's heavy footfalls against the deck.

"Don't!" she ordered harshly, blinking back tears. "Just don't, dad! Don't talk to me."

"I did it for you, love." Anton said gently. "I will not die knowing all you'll ever amount to is a fisherman's daughter. You deserve better."

"And what did Alexandria deserve?" she asked, turning to him. "I know we weren't making it there, but we could have found another wayâ€|"

"If you think you could have stopped this, you're fooling yourself, Shahira." Said a third voice. Yanick Erwan, the blacksmith, appeared from the lower deck. He took a seat on a lobster trap. He was fiddling with one of Hiccup's pulleys. The same pulleys which had allowed them to outrun Alexandrian ships for the past two days.

"That city has been doomed for ages." Yanick said. "You weren't the only ones. No reason why you can't profit from the destruction. It's a cold, dark world. You can't do nuthin' but look out for you and yours."

At that very moment a familiar high-pitched noise rent the air. A large black shape dropped out of the clouds, wings unfurling at the last second to slow it before it hit the deck.

"I'll be damned!" Yanick said.

The fearsome black dragon was back, with Hiccup riding atop it. The beast had blood-stained jaws and stank of fire and smoke. Strange cylindrical containers had been strapped all over its saddle. Hiccup himself was still dressed in his leather armour. He removed his helmet to reveal a cold, angry gaze which traveled from her, to her father, to Yanick and back.

"Hiccup!" she said, striding forwards across the deck. "Hiccup, please!"

The breeze had caught his auburn hair, and the sunlight was shining across his face. There was a cut on his cheek, and his strange leather uniform was battered and scratched; a sign of his participation in the distant battle. He looked heroic, a far cry from the awkward young man she had first introduced to Artemisia. She found herself wishing more than anything to join him in the saddle. It was illogical, but she somehow felt that if she could get him to understand why, get him to join them, perhaps it would help alleviate her guilt.

"Hiccup, I know you must be angry."

"No, I get it." He said, his voice biting and snide. "You wanted to move up in the world, and damn everyone else. I get it."

"It's not like that!" she shot back tearfully.

Anton stepped forward. "Don't lecture us, kid. You have no idea how hard we've had to work and scrape--"

"Shut up or my dragon will bite your head off."

Anton's mouth closed abruptly.

"I wasn't lecturing. And if you can live with what you've done, nothing I say will make any difference anyway."

"Kid, I think you're looking at this all wrong." Yanick said.

"Toothless, if that man makes any moves, blast him!"

The dragon growled, a low visceral noise. Its eyes narrowed on Yanick.

"Oh." The blacksmith crossed his arms. "So that's how it is, huh? After all I did for you? Here I was just looking out for me and mine. And you were one of them, Hiccup. You were one of mine."

"That privilege just makes me go weak at the knees, Yanick." The youth replied coolly. "Where's my godsdamned sword! Where's my gladius?" he looked to each of them in turn. With a clear threat in his voice, he said, "Shahira?"

She retrieved it from the bottom of her personal locker, where she had been keeping it wrapped safely in some spare sheeting. For good measure she retrieved the modest bag of money as well. She handed it up to him as gingerly as she dared. The dragon hissed at her when she came too close, but Hiccup laid a hand on its forehead and it calmed right down.

"Hiccup, we can settle down." Shahira said tearfully as he strapped the sword to his belt. His shield was on his back, alongside a thin, curved scimitar. She said, "We have money now. We can buy a farm. Build a forge. There's a place for you and the dragon, if you want it. We can still make a life together, Hiccup!"

"I have a responsibility." The boy said, his voice resolute. Hiccup tapped one of the long, strange cylinders strapped to his dragon. He said, "This is all that's left of Alexandria. The library and everyone else is gone. Artemisia entrusted it to me, and I have to take care of it."

"So what? You can come with us. You don't have to let the past dictate what you do!"

Hiccup stared down at his dragon. His fists clenched against the handles of his saddle, and he looked back up at her. "That's what I'm doing every time I run away. Every single time. I'm tired of it. I'm going home. Try not to burn any more cities full of innocent people in your quest for a few acres of fertile soil."

With that, his dragon took off northwest towards Italy, leaving her alone to find a life with her father and Yanick.

* * *

><p>And that's that, folks. We're done with Alexandria. I hope this was a satisfying conclusion. Everything from here on in is Berk.

Midoriko-Sama's final chapter of her trilogy has been updated. It is 'M' rated, but please go give it some love.

**I know the first sentence of this chapter was probably music to the ears of many, but I hope some of you at least will miss it, or at least miss the history and science and learning the way I know Hiccup would. I really wanted to give Hiccup an adventure before his return. Something that would redefine his priorities, and give him a strong reason to come back and fight for the future. **

23. Chapter 23

Expect another round of Viking politics before Hiccup gets back. I reckon this is going to be another Astrid Hofferson multi-chapter. Not too much longer guys. You've all been very patient.

Prodigal Son 23

It was the morning after Brynjolf's death. Astrid had heard little from Stoick the Vast after their initial discussion. She had expected him to show at her family's hall that evening, but he hadn't. When she passed his house, she glanced quietly through a crack in the wall and saw him sitting alone with a mug of mead and a plate of dry mutton. Hiccup's horned helmet was on the table, beside the boy's heart-shaped sketch of Astrid. The chief had swollen red eyes. His shoulders were drooped and he was leaning on his elbows, head hanging low. She decided to let him be.

She allowed the children a day's break from Dragon Training, to help them deal with their grief. It also bought her more time to heal and adjust. She woke up early and used the pre-dawn light to navigate to Toothless' Cove. After making sure she wasn't followed, she slipped quietly through the stone crevice into the cove and sat on a stump near the pool's edge, listening to the babbling of the quiet stream.

Stormfly's footprints were everywhere in the soft turf, but there was no sign of the dragon herself. Astrid thought for a moment she may have grown bored and simply flown away. A deep sense of relief swept through her at the possibility, but also a great deal of sadness. Her public life on Berk had become a lie. A necessary evil, and something she knew was about to get a whole lot more complicated. The dragon, with her simple charm and genuine emotions held a certain comfort for Astrid, and a part of her missed it dearly.

She had brought a bag of fish for Stormfly, and some cooked chicken for herself. She was halfway through her meal when leathery wings flapped behind her, and she heard a chirruping noise which filled her with both relief and frustration. Wide, heavy, taloned feet squelched in the soft soil, and the dragon tromped up to Astrid and gently nuzzled her shoulder.

"Hey, girl!" Astrid turned and rubbed her dragon on the nose. Stormfly took the opportunity to lean down to sniff at the chicken.

"Hey, no!" Astrid snatched up her meal and leaned away. "That's mine. Eat the fish. The fish is yours!"

Stormfly quieted and settled back on her haunches so she could stare up at Astrid, her yellow eyes wide and doleful. She chirped and nuzzled Astrid's side gently as a lamb, then gave her rider another imploring look. Astrid glared down at her, resenting how quickly the dragon's begging was breaking down her defences. "Urgh. Fine. But only because you've been such a good girl."

She tore off a chicken leg and tossed it to Stormfly, who gulped it up, only to straighten and continue her puppy-like emotional assault.

"No! I gave you one, now eat your fish!" Astrid pulled a raw fish out of the bag and plopped it down on Stormfly's snout. The dragon flicked it into the air with barely a movement, and caught it in her mouth. She turned attention to the bag, which Astrid opened for her. The dragon began to slurp up the salmon, munching loudly.

"What am I going to do with you, girl? Astrid asked, running her hand along Stormfly's scales. "What am I going to do period? I don't know what's going to happen next. I didn't love Hiccup Haddock, and I don't want to be chief. I'm going to lie to everyone but Fishlegs. But I have to. Snotlout can't be in power. That bastard doesn't know what he's doing. I don't know what I'm doing either."

Having polished off the fish, Stormfly laid her head gently in Astrid's lap, letting the woman scratch behind her frill, and smooth down her scales.

"And you're just a whole other complication, aren't you?" she asked. The dragon gurgled up at her happily, and scooped the chicken off of her lap and down its gullet.

They spent the morning flying all the way around Berk, high above the village. It looked so small from that distance. Just a tiny little town nestled between a sheer cliff and the foot of an enormous mountain. Too small for the petty squabbles which seemed to forever occupy its citizens. She wondered if Hiccup had felt the same way the first time he had flown on Toothless' back.

Dawn broke while they were among the clouds, and Astrid gasped at the way the sunlight sparkled on the water, and caught her village in its golden glow. A great feeling of peace enveloped her, and she resolved to find a way to fit Stormfly into her life. She knew at that moment she didn't want to give up flight. Not for anything.

When they landed, she gave her dragon a tight hug, and told her to stay. Stormfly obeyed, thankfully. Perhaps understanding on some level Astrid's desire to protect her. It didn't stop Astrid from feeling terribly guilty for leaving the dragon standing there in the cove.

* * *

><p>Astrid made a stop at the Great Hall in the mid-morning. She gave Iona the Cook a nod as she passed by, and then stopped and turned to face her.</p>

"I'm sorry about yesterday." She said. "I was being harsh. I didn't want to hurt you, and I'm glad you're concerned. Thank you."

Iona examined her sourly for a moment, and then brightened. She shrugged. "It's alright, Astrid. Want some soup?" she proffered a steaming bowl. Astrid shook her head and held up a hand. "No thanks. I ate already. I was here to see Fridleif, actually."

"I think he's doing just fine." Iona grinned and pointed across the hall. Fridleif was lying on a pile of blankets, being spoon-fed his soup by a young beautiful young Thorston girl. One of the Twins' cousins, if Astrid remembered correctly. Lifa? Was that her name? One of Goethi's apprentices. Anyway the young man looked perfectly at ease, though he groaned rather theatrically at moments, resulting in a flurry of sympathetic and veryâ€œ involved activity from the young woman.

Astrid rolled her eyes and looked back at Iona, who winked. The cook's expression grew more serious. "I heard about what happened in the Ring. Poor Brynjolf. The Barrason hall is next to ours, and we

could hear Brenna crying all night."

"I wasn't there." Astrid said quickly. "I got there a few seconds too late."

Iona must have picked up the strain in her voice. "No one blames you, Astrid."

Astrid grabbed the bowl Iona had set aside for her, and slurped from it anyway. It gave her something to do with her hands, and an excuse to stay near the cook. She said, "What are people saying, Iona?"

"It'sâ€¦ difficult." The cook shifted uncomfortably. "My husband Styr is a Sigurdson. We're allied with the Jorgensons."

"I'm not asking you to testify at a trial."

"I know." She sighed and leaned forward, glancing around the hall. Vikings were gathered in groups of two or three, chatting with one another between bites and sips of mead. "Alright, look, a lot of people are unhappy with what happened. Your name is out of it. But when Snotlout came in to eat this morning, the entire hall just soured. I think people would have said something if the brat didn't have his little gang of friends with him. Nothing's going to come of it, of course. Too many clans depend on the Jorgensons for support, and nobody wants to question Stoick the Vast."

"Trust Stoick." Astrid recommended. "He's in a difficult situation, but he's smarter than you think."

Iona shook her head and laughed quietly. "Only you could be that loyal after he tried to get you exi-"

"Don't remind me."

"Is he planning something, Astrid? There has to be some consequences for this. People are too angry to just let it go."

"I can't say anything formal, you know that."

"And off the record?"

Astrid stared down into the cauldron. She said, "He's examining his options."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

Iona opened and closed her mouth, looking for the best way to phrase her question. Eventually she gave up on subtly altogether. "I'm really sorry for bringing this up, but why Hiccup?"

Astrid blinked, surprised, "What?"

"I wasn't training in the ring with you guys when we were growing up, but I know what it was like back then. Fishlegs was too soft. Tuffnut was an idiot, but he had his charm, and everyone wanted Snotlout. All of us did. But Hiccup? I mean no offense, but why?"

"Hiccup was different."

"Opposites attract?"

"Something like that." Astrid bit her lip and stared into the broth. "The older I grow, the more I understand about him. I've come to appreciate a whole lot more about him recently, I can tell you that much. Why did you pick Styr?"

Iona shrugged. "He's brave and strong. A little older than I was, but not gross old. He saved my whole family from a zippleback. The marriage offer was generous. His family was respectable. How could I say no?"

"Hiccup wasn't a coward either." Astrid said, feeling obliged to offer her friend some insight. "He wanted to be in the ring."

"Bit of a fishbone, though." Iona said. "Could you imagine him going up against a Gronckle?"

"He might have grown out of it." Astrid said fairly.

"Stoick was his father." Iona agreed. "He was from sturdy stock."

"Guess I'll never know."

"Sorry."

Astrid took another gulp of the piping hot broth. When she lowered the bowl, she found Iona grinning at her.

"You'll never guess what Bucket was saying this morning." The cook said conspiratorially.

"What?"

"He said he saw someone riding a dragon. A dragon! Can you imagine?"

Astrid laughed, trying to keep the nervousness out of her voice.
"Poor Bucket."

"Right? Mulch was shushing him all through the meal, but he wouldn't stop talking about it!"

"What kind of dragon was it?"

"He didn't say."

Astrid shot a glance back at Fridleif, who caught her eye. He was sitting up in bed and being embraced rather unprofessionally by Lifa, and his hand was slowly inching its way down past the young woman's waistline. Astrid scowled at him, and his hand returned to his nurse's shoulder.

* * *

><p>It rained that afternoon. Light droplets which hung in the air

and soaked through clothing as fast as the heaviest, hardest downpour. She actually stopped at home for a moment to oil her axe and wrap it in a thick cloth bundle. The last thing she needed was a rusty weapon. Then she paid Brenna Barrason a visit. The Barrasons hall was situated on the northern side of Berk, near the edge of the cliffs. The sea stacks near Raven point could be seen from behind their home, though the kill ring was hidden behind an enormous jutting rock formation.<p>

Brenna was at home with her son Bard, only a few years older than Astrid. He was married to a Hofferson. One of her cousins, and the two of them were trying for a child though they hadn't succeeded yet. He answered the door with a glum look, and let her inside without a word.

"Astrid!" Astrid found herself engulfed by Brenna, whose eyes were red and puffy. "I'm so glad you stopped by!"

"I wanted to apologize."

"It wasn't you." Bard said. "We know what happened. It was Snotlout."

"He already stopped by this morning." Brenna said, her voice hoarse. "Gave us a sheep and offered his condolences."

"We're having Mutton for dinner." Bard added.

"It was that or throw it off the cliff. I couldn't stand to look at the bloody thing." Brenna explained. She offered Astrid a chair and took a seat across from her.

"Brynjolf was working as part of a team, trying to save lives." Astrid explained. "The other children told me what happened. He fought very bravely, and he fought smartly. By all accounts he gave as good as he got."

"Of course he did." Brenna managed a smile. "You taught him."

"I'm so sorry that heâ€¢!" She growled in frustration and thumped the table. "I should have been there. I woke up that morning and I was just so tired-"

"It's alright." Brenna reached across the table and clasped Astrid's hand. "You Hoffersons have always been so close to our family. You're like a second daughter, Astrid. I know you. You'd never have made a mistake like that. You'd never have exposed him toâ€¢ to dangerâ€¢" she burst into tears, and in an instant Bard was at her side, wrapping his enormous arms around her shoulders. He held her for a moment, gently rubbing his mother's back as she sobbed into his shoulder. He gave Astrid a nod towards the back door, and met her out there a moment later.

"Snotlout has to die." He said, pacing back and forth as they stood beside the cliff. "I have a group of friends ready to move on him."

"That's not a road we want to go down."

"Do you want him as chief?" Bard asked. "Because if we don't do

something, that's what's coming!"

"You touch Snotlout, and the Jorgensons will have your head."

"I don't care."

"You should. There'll be a feud. The Island will split in two."

Bard responded in a heated voice. "It'll split anyway. You think any of us are going to follow that fool, Astrid? He'll lead us all to Hel's gate! And what use has Stoick been? Just sitting in his damned hall all the time crying over his damned kid!" the man fell silent, breathing heavily. He looked shocked at his own words. "I'm sorry, Astrid. I didn't mean... I was just venting."

"It's fine."

"My brother died holding the axe I bought for him on his first day of dragon training. Gobber forged it. I had it made special for him."

"If he died holding it, then he's in Valhalla."

"Doesn't stop me from missing him." Bard said slowly. "And I'm sorry for what I said about Hiccup, Astrid. I know how you two were—"

"It's fine." She said firmly. "It's just this war."

The man let out a forlorn laugh. "Right. Ever wonder what peace feels like?"

She eyed him curiously. A thought occurred to her. "Maybe we can get there."

He gave her a sharp look. "What do you mean?"

"What if I told you I could get us to the nest?"

"Ha! You'll kill us all. This island can't stand more wasted lives. We couldn't even get past the fog last time!"

"The fog is created by a swarm of little dragons who take the metal from our swords and armour and weld them together to make their nests. I've seen it with my own eyes. We keep the metal on our boats covered and out of sight, they'll let us pass."

"Going in without weapons?" Bard said doubtfully. "What's to stop the big dragons from carrying us all off to Hel and burning our boats?"

"I have a solution for that too, but it's going to sound crazy."

Bard folded his arms. "Try me."

"Eels."

Bard stared at her in shock. Then he burst out laughing.

"I'm serious!" Astrid stamped her foot. "Dragons hate them! They run from them! It's right in the book of dragons."

"Dragons run from nothing." Bard said, "I think you should go see Goethi. Have her examine your head." He walked back into his hall, shutting the door behind him. Astrid stared at the closed wooden door, her face burning.

"Fascinating." Said a voice by her ear. Astrid yelped, and spun around, nearly losing her balance. Fishlegs was standing there, staring at the Barrason's door.

"Fishlegs! You snuck up on me!" Astrid glared at him, caught between anger, amusement, and curiosity. She hadn't realized that a man as large as him could step so lightly.

"Sorry." Fishlegs said delicately, twiddling his fingers in a modest way. "I couldn't help but overhear."

"I bet you could if you tried."

He turned away, facing out towards the ocean and the cold grey sky beyond. "Eels, huh?"

"I'm right." Astrid said, fuming. "We hang them from the rigging, and the dragons will leave us alone. I know I'm right! You know I'm right!"

"I know. But Bard's reaction is going to be the typical one."

"How do I get them to believe me?"

"Them thinking you're crazy probably won't help you much."

"Oh, thank you so much for that assessment."

"Just trying to help." Fishlegs said, once again playing up the gentle modest giant she knew he wasn't. "I've found personally that choosing when to play your cards is just as important as the hand you're carrying."

"What does that mean?"

"Telling them all up front is just going to earn you scorn when your idea is as untraditional as that. We may need to wait for another raid before we can actually prove it to them."

"Great." Astrid growled. "So more people get to die before we put a stop to this."

"Vikings are stubborn. Minds don't change overnight. If you want to win, you have to play the long game."

She stayed silent.

"How is Stoick handling the Snotlout problem?" Fishlegs asked, changing tack.

"I told him to adopt me as heir in lieu of Hiccup."

Fishlegs nodded in satisfaction. "Good news for Berk."

Astrid glared at the back of his head. "Fishlegs?"

"Mmm?"

"You set all of this in motion." The accusation and suspicion in her tone was unmistakeable.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He said innocently. "All I wanted was to get my hands on Hiccup's journal. You stole the sketch, Astrid. I had nothing to do with Stoick's raid, or that 'raft' which you brought back with you."

Astrid glanced around, searching for any listening ears. When she was sure they were alone, she hissed, "You told them I loved Hiccup."

"It was aâ€| possible explanation. One of many. I'm glad you chose to adopt it. It's going to mve Berk in the right direction."

"You told me to sell my name to Stoick. To get caught up in all of these politics."

"Did I? As I recall, I justâ€| made you aware of the gravity of our situation. You made the choice yourself."

"I had to!" Astrid argued. "Brynjolf got killed. It was Snotlout's fault."

Fishlegs smiled. "It sounds to me like Snotlout has a lot more to do with all of this than I do."

"Dress it up how you like it, but I'm beginning to feel like a puppet. What do you gain from all this?"

"Besides a Berk without monthly dragon raids, you mean?" Fishlegs asked, drumming his fingers together, "One might assume the Ingeman clan will do well under the new regime." He turned back to her, his face innocent. "We've always been very close allies of the Hoffersons and the Haddocks, after all."

Astrid eyed him carefully. "That'sâ€| true..." she admitted carefully.

He nodded and strode away, though he stopped after a few paces and turned back. "Astrid, be careful of the Jorgensons. There'll be pushback if you jump ranks ahead of Snotlout, and the Jorgensons aren't to be trifled with."

* * *

><p>The rest of Astrid's afternoon was taken up with chores. A pall had fallen over Berk. It was exactly the same as when Sluglout died. Quiet whispers, discouraged looks. Villagers moved like ghosts, floating from place to place with neither warmth, nor vigour. She wandered the island, collecting firewood and carrying sacks of wheat to and from the mill - another one of Hiccup's designs. Weaving cloth was not a hobby she was particularly good at, and she so eventually wandered over to Gobber's forge to help the stout blacksmith take

care of his weapons. He looked up from his forge as she approached. His face was sombre; Brynjolf's death had brought back many unpleasant memories for him.<p>

He greeted her with a sympathetic nod. "Astrid. I heard about Brynjolf. Do yeh want ta talk?"

She shook her head slowly. "Just work. Anything you need help with?"

He gave her an understanding nod and motioned with his hook towards the opposite side of the smithy. Rows of swords and axes had been stacked on a low table.

"I need those blades oiled and honed. Dragon scales wreak holy havoc on blades. Dulls them till they could be put ta use as butter knives."

Gobber himself had disassembled one of the machines in his forge, a peddle-driven grindstone. By the look of things a gear had broken inside it, and the smith was using a pair of tongs to finagle pieces of wood and wire into place, trying to repair it. Astrid took a seat, grabbed a sharpening stone and the nearest sword and set to work, rubbing the stone along the blade.

They worked in silence for a long time. Shadows slowly crawled across the floor. Gobber was silent at first, but as the hours slowly rolled past, he began to mutter to himself. He had tried four times thus far to repair the machine, and each time he had reassembled it and pumped the peddle only to hear the sound of something else crack or snap inside the confusing mess of gears and tangled wires.

"Infernal bloody machine!" the smith roared. "Stamin' pile of flea-ridden yakshit!" He planted his foot in the side of the grinder, crushing most of the internal mechanisms. "Oh Thorâ€œ!" the smith sank to the ground beside the broken grinder. Astrid watched through the corner of her eye as his shoulders began to shake. He was crying, she realized. Enormous tears rolled down his cheeks and soaked into his moustache. She carefully set down the sword she was working on and rose to her feet.

"Gobber?"

The enormous Viking sniffed and rubbed his eyes. "Eight years that grinder's been running. Eight bloody years! Never broke down. Not once. Yeh had ta tighten it to keep it from shakin' itself apart, but it never broke. Not once. Never." He looked up at her, making no effort to hide his grief. "It was Hiccup's design and I got no clue how he made it work."

Astrid slid down beside him and patted him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Gobber reached up to his work bench and fumbled blindly for a rag, which he used to blow his nose.

"Hiccup was special." Astrid said.

"Don't try tha' on me. I know he was." Gobber turned to her, wiping his eyes. He said, "Why are yeh doin' this, Astrid? You an' tha' boy

were never close. Why are yeh sayin' it now?"

The bottom of her stomach dropped out, and Astrid quickly looked away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That child spent every waking hour either trying to impress his dad, or get yeh ta notice him. I know for a fact he did neither of those things while he was alive."

"We spent time together after Dragon Training." She lied. "I was teaching him what I knew."

"If yeh'd bin teachin' him he'd ha' planted an axe in tha' Gronckle's head in no time. Bu' he didn't. He put it out without any weapons at all, and left yeh in the dust doin' it. He won the tournament. I reckon Hiccup was learnin' on his own. I don't know how, but he was. He was good at tha'."

"You remember that last lesson very clearly." Astrid said, remembering the radical narrative of Hiccup's journal.

"O'course I do. It was the last time I e'er saw the boy."

Astrid stayed quiet.

"I taugh' tha' boy for fourteen years and I ne'er saw him handle a blade withou' cuttin' himself. Yer lyin'. Don't play me for a fool, Astrid. Yeh can be cold, but yer not heartless." He met her eyes, and not looking away was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

"Why re yeh doin' this? The only reason this town is buying tha' romance nonsense is because none of them knew Hiccup. But I did. Those memories are sacred. They're important. I don't know wha' yer game is, but Hiccup deserves better than a lie."

Astrid took a deep breath. She said, "I want to stop Snotlout from becoming chief. If Stoick and the Village think I was Hiccup's intendedâ€|"

Gobber leaned back until his head thunked against the edge of his work bench. "Yeh've drawn blood and broken bone for this village, an' had yers drawn and broken in turn. But yer still a young maid, Astrid."

"Not young anymoreâ€|"

"Next ta me? Yeah. Yer a young'un. Are yeh sure yeh want to give yer soul away already? Everything you'll do will be based on a terrible lie. Yeh'll be takin' advantage of a dead boy's legacy."

"If I make Chief, no more Sluglouts. No more Brynjolfs. No more Hiccups. What's that worth, Gobber? What would Hiccup say?"

Gobber snorted. "Tha's low."

"If this is going to work, I need them to buy it. You have to keep quiet, Gobber. You can't tell them I'm lying."

He ran a hand down his beard. "It's a righ' bloody mess, Lass. A righ' bloody messâ€| jus' do me a favour, and don't let the

Jorgensons push yeh around. They're good at tha'."

* * *

><p>Stoick was sitting in Hofferson Hall. It was the strangest sight to behold. Even while sitting he towered over Haldor and Brunhilda Hofferson. His mere kingly presence warped the environment around him, making everything else background.</p>

"Astrid!" Brunhilda rose to her feet as her daughter entered. Haldor did as well.

"Mum. Dad. Chief." Astrid nodded to each of them in turn. She could see confusion and surprise on her parent's faces, and she knew that Stoick had just proposed the new arrangement. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized that this might be one of the last nights she spent under her own roof.

Brunhilda was rushing forward. Astrid took a few steps towards her mother, and they threw their arms around each other.

"Astrid, Stoickâ€| our chiefâ€| has proposed anâ€| arrangement."

Astrid nodded. "I already know about it."

"You alreadyâ€|" Brunhilda's brow furrowed, and her mouth fell open.

"I already know, mum. Stoick and I talked it over already."

"Butâ€| Astridâ€| You have a family here. A home. You're welcome under our roof. We love you!" Brunhilda drew her daughter in and hugged her tightly. "I love you."

"I love you too, mum. But this has nothing to do with you guys."

"It has everything to do with us." Haldor said, "You're our daughter."

"And a grown woman." Astrid reminded him. "I'm bringing my own dowry. You don't have to pay a cent."

"It's not the money, Astrid!" Brunhilda explained. "I don't want to lose my daughter!"

"It's my choice, mum."

"But why? Why are you doing this?"

"Politics." Explained Stoick, who had maintained a respectful silence.

"I love you. Both of you. But we all know what will happen to Berk if Snotlout gets a hold of real power. Berk needs a different heir."

"This is because of what happened to Brynjolf, isn't it?" Brunhilda probed.

"That was the final straw." Stoick said. "But this has been a long time coming. I've chosen Astrid as my heir, and I'm willing to buy her as the bride she would have been for my son."

Brunhilda shook her head. "How am I supposed to put a price on my own daughter?"

"Farmland out near silent Sven's place, a flock of sheep, and a fishing boat bought up front for our family's immediate use." Astrid said. Her mother and father stared, shocked and helpless.

Stoick raised his eyebrows. "That's a steep price, Astrid."

"I want my family taken care of, sir. I've been told by two different people that the Jorgensons aren't going to like this. Right now my family are fishermen, and we rent our vessels from the Jorgensons. I want us protected from any fallout over this."

"Plenty of families across Berk are in our situation, Astrid." Haldor informed her. "We might not be the only ones."

Brunhilda scoffed doubtfully. "They wouldn't stoop so low as to hold the entire village hostage."

"For the throne?" Haldor asked. "Maybe. I don't know. I know they'd want a Jorgenson on the throne before a Hofferson."

"We'll have to deal with that when it comes, but I want my family protected." Astrid said, "And I'll be taking the Haddock name, actually. In honour of Hiccup."

"Whatâ€¡?" Haldor deflated. He ran a hand through his thick hair. "I don't understand how that's all of a sudden important. Why was that never mentioned?"

"Haldor!" Brunhilda scolded, though she fixed Astrid with a look.

"I didn't mention I was going to restart dragon training after Gobber left either." Astrid argued, "I just went and did it."

"And since when do children tell their parents of their love lives, dear?" Brunhilda asked.

"Leaving out the details is one thing, but we're usually aware that they have one at least." Haldor explained. "Brunhilda did you know about Hiccup and Astrid until the trial? Because I didn't have a clue. I just don't understand how this eight-year-old relationship I knew nothing about is suddenly dictating all of her decisions!"

"Dad, nothing's being dictated. I'm doing this because if Snotlout is chief, Berk falls apart. I've volunteered. This was my idea from the start, and thank Thor Stoick agreed to it." This proclamation was met with silence as both her parents were struck momentarily speechless.

"You'll make an excellent chief, Astrid." Stoick said, rising to his feet.

"Sounds like you've made your mind up." Brunhilda observed sadly,

ignoring the chief. Her worried attentions were focused solely on her daughter.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried," Astrid admitted. "I don't want to give up my name, but I have to."

"This just doesn't sound like you. Political manoeuvring? Since when have you wanted to become involved in this sort of thing?"

"Since one of my students was killed by Snotlout's incompetence!" Astrid declared hotly. "I know Gobber just ran back to his forge after Sluglout died, but I'm not him. Berk has a problem, and I can solve it, mum! I can make things better! I will make things better!"

"I can put a stop to this." Haldor said, sounding as desperate as he did determined. "I'm still the man of this household—" He stopped as his wife laid a hand on his arm.

Brunhilda stepped forward and laid both of her palms against Astrid's cheeks, forcing her daughter to look up and meet her eyes.

"You really want this, don't you?" she asked quietly.

"Yes."

"This sort of change can get very ugly, Astrid."

"I know. I'm prepared for that, mum."

"I love you." Brunhilda told her.

"We both do." Haldor added.

"I love you too, but Berk needs this. Village first, mum."

Brunhilda nodded and drew a long, shaky breath. She leaned forward and kissed Astrid on the forehead. "Very well. Stoick, if you'll take our price!"

"I will." Stoick said. His voice was firm, but also carried a hint of sympathy, from one parent to another.

Brunhilda nodded silently.

"Dad, could you get a quill and paper please?" Astrid said. "We should write up a contract."

As Haldor moved away towards the back of their hall, Stoick came forward. He laid a hand on Brunhilda's shoulder. "She'll be treated well under my roof."

Brunhilda glared at him. "She had damned well better be!"

* * *

><p>They made the formal announcement the following morning. All the heads from the major clans were there, gathered around the circular table in the great hall. Fishlegs was sitting with his grandparents, the Ingeman elders. He observed the proceedings with an air of

dispassion, though he favoured Astrid with a small smile as they were sitting down. Snotlout was there as well, sitting silently with his father Spitelout, who also spent the meeting in silence, though his face grew progressively redder as time wore on and he developed the expression of a man who just swallowed a bad oyster. The door to the great hall had been left open, and plenty of people across the island had gathered there, watching and listening in silence.<p>

Astrid sat at Stoick's side. At her other shoulder were her parents, all three of them dressed in the Hofferson's very best clothing, as threadbare as it was. Stoick himself was wearing a finely woven forest green tunic, and a bearskin cape. His beard had been trimmed and re-braided. His hair had been combed and set back in its usual ferocious braid which hung down his back.

Berk's chieftain did most of the talking. He spoke at great length about Astrid's skills in the ring, about her perseverance and discipline. He spoke of her relationship with Hiccup, and what could have been.

"My friends, no one was more surprised than I to discover what my son was doing with his time out of the ring, but no one is more pleased. Astrid Hofferson is a fine young woman. A warrior, and a hard worker. She has shown her mettle a hundred times, and a hundred times over. She's the Pride of Berk."

At this proclamation, Snotlout scoffed audibly. Stoick hesitated for but a moment, but it was long enough to let the entire room know he had heard the noise. Everyone tensed.

Stoick picked up his quill, and shooting Snotlout a glare, he said, "I have struck a bargain with the Hofferson clan. In exchange for a generous sum, she is to join my family as the daughter she would have been, and take up the Haddock name, as she would have long ago were my son still alive. This war has taken much from all of us, and it pleases me greatly that I'm finally able to set things straight. Astrid Hofferson, when she becomes a Haddock, will be my daughter. She will have access to my lands and funds as the Laws allow. She will reside in my hall, and speak with my authority. She is my heir, and you are to treat her with the same respect you would have given to my son."

"Why in the nine realms would she go for Hiccup the Useless?" Snotlout whispered in that special sort of whisper which carries all around the room. The Thorston's faces remained blank, though many of the other clans shot him deadly glares. There was a dull thump beneath the table and he let in a sharp breath. "Ow! My foot. What was that for?"

Spitelout glared at him. "Do not interrupt your chief, Snotlout. And show respect." He leaned forward, lacing his fingers together and resting his hands on the table. "You're a very wise young woman, Astrid. May I commend you for your taste? Hiccup Haddock was an intelligent, promising young lad. The Jorgenson clan mourns with you for his loss."

"Thank you." Astrid said respectfully.

"I hope you bring that same wisdom to bear in the choices you make as you lead us into the future." Spitelout added. A few of Astrid's

supporters on the far side of the table applauded.

"I will."

"Is there anyone who wants to dispute this? Any concerns which you wish to bring to light?" Stoick looked directly at Spitelout. Clans around the table shook their heads quickly. Many of the Patrons and Matrons were looking particularly pleased, offering Astrid encouraging smiles, and a few winks. Spitelout waited a moment, examining the reactions around the table. Nearly three-quarters of those present showed open support for Astrid Hofferson. A few people, including Fishlegs, stayed publicly neutral. A few more, like the Thorstons, were waiting for his judgment before they made their own. Aware that the majority supported Stoick's decision, Spitelout shook his head and smiled at Astrid. "My beloved Brother, You've made an excellent choice. Our congratulations to both of you."

"Thank you." Stoick said. "Anyone else?"

No one spoke, and the Jorgenson allies offered their own smiles and pledges of support.

"Thank you." Astrid said. The contract was signed by Stoick and Haldor, and witnessed by the Ingermans, the Barrasons, and the Thorstons. Applause broke out across the table, and out in the crowds beyond the doorway.

A feeling of numbness engulfed her as the meeting was adjourned, and the clan heads gathered around to offer their congratulations. They all seemed to meld together so that she could not tell one clan from the next, all she knew was that her wrist was getting sore from shaking so many hands. Her mother watched tearfully from a short distance away, Haldor's arms around her, and he was weeping too.

Stoick's hand landed on her shoulder, a heavy, jarring and uncomfortable gesture, though his smile was bursting with genuine pride and happiness. An expression no one had seen on him in over eight years. He pulled her into his side in a crushing embrace, and she smiled as best she could. She caught sight of Spitelout and Snotlout exiting the Hall in a hurry. Both of them had been amongst the first to offer their congratulations and shake her hand. Spitelout had been cordial, Snotlout on the other hand, had smiled through his teeth. As she watched them exit, she remembered Gobber's warning, and Fishlegs' as well. She wondered when and where the hammer was going to fall.

"Astrid, are you alright?"

Stoick, her new father, was looking down at her in concern.

"I'm alright. It's just a lot to take in." she said. "It's overwhelming."

He laughed. It was a deep, booming sound which filled the hall, and warmed everyone's hearts. "I know the feeling. Go kill some trees." He advised. "We'll open Haddock Hall tomorrow and have a proper reception."

Astrid obeyed, stopping with her parents first, both of whom embraced

her. "You're still my daughter!" Brunhilda whispered into her ear as they shared a tearful hug. "You're still my daughter."

"I love you, mum."

"You're always welcome in our hall." Haldor said. "Come and see us! Don't forget that we love you."

"I will." Astrid promised. "I will!"

From there it was a frantic, mad rush to get out of town. Villagers left right and centre all greeted her with applause, and well-wishes. It was all she could do to escape into the woods. She managed to escape the crowd and snag a basket of fish. From there she headed straight to Raven Point, doing several wide loops through the woods to prevent anyone from following her.

She found Stormfly and practically leapt onto the dragon's back. They flew all around the far side of the island, and did laps around the sea stacks until her head stopped spinning, and she no longer felt the urge to vomit.

24. Chapter 24

Prodigal Son 24

"Welcome home." Stoick said, holding open the door to Haddock Hall.

Astrid hesitated before stepping through, feeling that once she did so, there was no turning back. A part of her desperately wanted to run back to the comfort of the Hofferson Hall and her mother and father, but she reminded herself that this had been her plan. The consequences were ones she was prepared to take. She stepped through, and the chief followed, shutting the door behind them.

The interior was spacious, but possessed a certain homey charm. The building was held up by four enormous central pillars, which sat around the hearth. A wooden wall with a darkened doorway divided the back end of Haddock Hall from the main hearth area. Off to Astrid's right was a dining table with a few chairs. To her left was a staircase leading up to the second floor; Hiccup's bedroom, though she wasn't about to tell Stoick how she knew that.

Cupboards lined the walls, and small chests and sacks were scattered throughout the room. Some hung from hooks, others simply sat on the floor. There was a bookshelf there as well. Hiccup's helmet was once again hanging off a nail which had been driven deep into one of the four pillars.

"I'll get a fire going." Stoick said, shuffling past her and bending over a small woodpile beside the door. "There's a pot and cookware in a cupboard by the table if you want to try your hand at cooking. But Iona usually comes by with a bowl of something and a loaf of bread."

"I might wait for her tonight, then." Astrid told him, "To be honest, everything I try to cook usually ends up black and burned."

"Heh. In that case perhaps I'll take up the post of household cook."

"Ha! You can cook?" Astrid tried to imagine the enormous warrior bent over a boiling pot, daintily adding herbs.

"Of course I can. Didn't have much choice but to learn." Stoick answered, straightening up and marching over to the fire. He dropped several thinner sticks onto it, and bent over to coax the hot coals back to life. "I know that cooking is regularly women's work, but after Val was taken I had to feed both of us. Hiccup could cook too. Quite well, actually." With a final breath, he managed to produce a small flame, to which he slowly fed finger-sized bundles of dried grass. "Just do me a favour and don't mention it to the men. I'd be the laughingstock of Berk."

"Your secret is safe with me, sir."

"Much appreciated." He propped the thicker sticks around his growing blaze, creating a little tent-like structure for the flames to devour.

"You said lately you had Iona bringing your meals, though."

His face darkened, and Astrid felt a stab of guilt. He said, "Yeah. Wellâ€¦ She would also stay and chat for a little while. Bring me the harmless gossip of the day. Whatever the Thorston twins were up to, or crazy nonsense Bucket was spouting." Stoick sat back on his heels and held out his hands over the comforting blaze. He smiled up at her. "It's going to feel good to have someone else in this hall, Astrid. I've found that silence and darkness are two things I never can quite get used to, no matter how long they keep me company."

"I can't imagine, sir." Astrid said politely. She herself had grown up in a Hall with her entire extended family. A blaze was always roaring in the hearth. Children running, crying, laughing, and chattering were a constant background noise. Her father, and her uncles were always gathered around the fire, and her mother and aunts were constantly bustling in and out of the hall. The Hofferson clan had thinned out a little over the past ten years, as more and more of her generation were married off, and more and more of the older generations passed on, but the thought of a completely empty hall was a strange and horrible one. She felt sorry for the aging warrior.

Stoick rose and dusted himself off. "Alrightâ€¦ the grand tour." He pointed back towards the darkened doorway. "That's my bedroom."

A separate bedroom. A separate _bedroom! _One of the perks of being chief, probably. I'm pretty sure you can find your way around here easily enough." Stoick said, gesturing to the main section of the hall. "I know you're a warrior like me. Sharpening stones and oil are in this cupboard here." He walked over to a cupboard under the stairs and tapped on it. Of all the cupboards in the room, that one had the least amount of dust on it. "As I said before, cooking pots and bowls and plates are in that cupboard over there, and if you get peckish, I keep a loaf of bread on the table." He pointed across at the platter. "Just pick the weevils out, if you care about that sort of thing. Now, this old chest here has spare linens. I keep the firewood stacked by the door. If the pile gets low, restock it, please."

There's nothing worse than to be stuck in the freezing cold morning with no firewood and a cold hearth, so keep the pile stocked. It'll give you practice with that axe." He strode over, snatched a few large logs off of said pile, and placed them across the now roaring fire. He straightened up and dusted his hands off.

Astrid stood to the side, respectfully silent.

"Ohâ€| right." Stoick grumbled. "The bedroom. You'll be staying upstairs in Hiccup's old room." He led her up the dusty, creaking steps and opened a door at the top of the stairs. "Don't mind the door. Put that in when I walked in on himâ€| never mind. But it'll give you some privacy when you want it."

"Thank you." Astrid responded politely. She stepped by him, and into Hiccup's room. It became immediately apparent that Stoick had cared deeply for his son. The furniture was all meticulously hand-crafted.

Against one wall, Stoick had constructed a studio, complete with a writing desk. A large board was hung up on the wall; a space for Hiccup to nail his drawings to. There was a wooden cup with a sturdy base. Inside were several quills, and a set of charcoal sticks for sketching. Several sets of shelves had been carefully constructed for Hiccup's papers. Weapon hooks hung on the wall, all of them empty, save for a blacksmith's apron which hung awkwardly from the hook nearest the door. Beside Hiccup's bed was a set of low shelves, upon which sat various trinkets and models, twig-sized versions of some of Berk's most effective siege weapons.

Astrid took a few steps into the room, and turned back to Stoick. The man had a tortured look about him, and there was a certain unwillingness to actually step into the room itself. He stayed instead at the top of the stairs, peering in after her.

"I'll get myself settled in." she assured him sympathetically.

"Thank you, Astrid. Just let me know if you're going toâ€| to throw any of it away."

"Wasn't planning on it, sir."

"It's your room now." Stoick explained. "It's been empty long enough. You aren't Hiccup. I'm sure you'll find things to fill it with sooner or later."

Astrid unslung her axe and hung it on a set of hooks near the door.
"I'll make do." She said.

"Right. Right. I'll justâ€|" he motioned over his shoulder and started down the stairs.

Astrid walked slowly around the room, unsure of where to put her feet, or what to look at. Hiccup's heart-shaped sketch had been placed on the desk, but she didn't really want to examine it again. Not only had it caused her so much current trouble, but something about it was beginning to put her off. Instead of ignoring it and turning away, she picked it up and gave it a thorough examination, looking for the problem.

After a moment of self-reflection, she realized it was the idolization. Hiccup had idolized her. It was true that he had managed to capture her ferocity, and determination, and a certain flavour of cold beauty as well. Her looks were something she was proud of, but not because of anything sexual in nature. They were a sign of her commitment to her goals; Astrid Hofferson was in good shape because she was a warrior and that was what survival and victory required. Clearly, though, her looks had meant much more to him, and in a very different way. It was a strange thing to think about.

More than that, though, her youthful determination was a result of the anger she had felt over the death of her uncle Finn. The ferocity displayed in her eyes, and so well captured by Hiccup's skilled hand, was a desire for vengeance. She had, at that age, wanted to hack dragons to pieces. She wanted to watch them bleed and die for the injuries they had done to her and her village. They were an evil threat to be destroyed.

Except that Stormfly was not evil. Neither was Toothless, probably, though Astrid had never met the dragon. Not all dragons were evil, in fact most of them probably weren't. While that was a revelation which would benefit everyone in the end, it meant that what Hiccup had captured so accurately was actually her blindness and stupidity, and an attitude she knew she would look back on with shame. Not only had he captured it, he had idolized it. Yet when the time had arrived for him to act the way she would have, when he had a dragon at his mercy, he had done a better thing than she would have.

She heard someone knocking at the door downstairs and set the sketch back on the writing desk. Iona's cheerful greeting pierced the wooden walls, though Astrid couldn't make out any words. She walked to the door and headed down the stairs. The cook had indeed arrived with two steaming bowls of salmon stew. Stoick was relieving her of her burden and ushering her inside.

Iona's face lit up when she saw Astrid coming down the stairs. "Oh, Thor! When you said Stoick was considering his options, I never imagined this! Astrid Haddock, Berk's Warrior Heir! This is amazing! This is great!"

Astrid exchanged a glance with Stoick. The man might have been smiling beneath his beard, but she couldn't tell. She said, "I wish everyone was as happy about it as you are, Iona."

"Most people are! You should have heard the gossip tonight!" Iona's face fell. "What have the Jorgensons said to you?"

"They've been nothing but polite." Stoick informed her.

Remembering well Fishlegs' warning, Astrid said, "A far better question is what have they been saying to you?"

Stoick nodded in agreement.

"Not much." Iona replied. "They talk to Styr, mostly. I'm just background, but I think they're still absorbing it. Snotlout was swearing at a blue streak though. He turned beet red."

"We're not trying to cause trouble between clans, Iona." Stoick

said.

"I know. I think a lot of us understand that. Even Jorgenson allies, but they have a lot on the line with Snotlout. I don't think they'll give up easily."

"I know." Said Astrid.

The three of them fell into a moment of awkward silence. Stoick turned away to place the bowls on the table. He crossed to the kitchen cupboard and pulled out two sets of cutlery and a few cups. A large jug of ale was produced, and the drink was poured.

As he worked in the background, Iona took a few steps over to Astrid and shook her hand eagerly. "Anyway congratulations, Astrid. I know you'll do us proud."

"Thank you." Astrid smiled at her.

"What are you planning to do as chief?" Iona asked.

"End the war."

Iona raised her eyebrows. "Wow. That's a tall order."

"Not when you know how to do it. Have a good night Iona."

"You too." Iona nodded to herself, and left without another word.

* * *

><p>Dinner was eaten in silence. The soup was delicious, though the bread was a little stale. Stoick finished his bowl first, and sat watching her across the table.</p>

"Tomorrow is going to be a long day, Astrid." He said.

"I know." Astrid broke apart another slice of bread and dipped it into the stew.

"There's going to be a lot of people stopping by. A lot of people shaking hands. Perhaps a few gifts."

"I know. I'll get a good night's sleep."

"And what about this plan of yours. Ending the war and all that." Stoick studied her. "I assume you mean this plan to find the nest."

"We already know where it is, we just have to get to it." Astrid explained confidently. "While I was making my way back to Berk, I saw something in Breakneck Bog. A type of dragon."

"There are many types of dragons."

"This kind steals metal. Pots, pans, plows, rakes, forks, knives, Axes, shieldsâ€¦ they also breathe smoke out of their mouths."

"The same kind which attacked us in the fog, then, eh?"

She nodded, dipping the bread and chewing on it as respectfully as she could. Stoick stroked his beard, deep in thought.

"The beasts are after the metal, not us." Astrid explained. "If we cover up our weapons, hide them in the chests, they'll ignore us."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

"Fat lot of good that does us when a Monstrous Nightmare burns us to pieces."

"We can ward off larger dragons by hanging eels from the rigging."

"Eels?" to his credit Stoick didn't laugh at her the way Bard had, but in his voice she heard the same scepticism.

"Dragons hate them."

"And you came by this information how?"

"It's right in the book of dragons, sir. We use this information. We get to the nest. We throw everything we have into battle. For better or worse, the war ends. We take them or they take us. Our own little Ragnarok."

Stoick sighed. "There's nothing I would love more than to end this war, and see the beasts dead or driven from these islands. But I am not going to be able to rally Berk around another assault on the nest. Not when the last one went so poorly. Especially not if I tell them to hide their weapons and hang eels from the rigging. Whether it works or not, it sounds insane, and that's enough to dissuade most people."

"I have my own support." Astrid said, "Perhaps togetherâ€|"

She trailed off. Stoick was shaking his head. "I can't see it being done, Astrid. Not without a hefty threat of some kind. Or if we had the Jorgenson's support. All three of us together might get this clan moving, but I doubt we'll see that."

"It's worth thinking about, sir."

"I agree."

They both retired soon after dinner, though Astrid regaled him with a few entertaining stories about teaching in the kill ring. The bed upstairs was soft, and far more comfortable after Astrid changed the straw, and the moth-eaten sheets. Though it was too short, being made for a boy of Hiccup's size, and she found that her feet poked out the bottom whenever she stretched her legs to their full length. She settled back regardless and blew out the candle she had carried upstairs with her. Bed length was the least of her problems.

She lay in the darkness for a long time, staring at the unfamiliar ceiling, and thinking about Hiccup Haddock. She wondered if he was still alive, and what he looked like. Short and spindly, probably,

with chubby cheeks and nobbly knees. She wondered what had become of his night fury, and where on earth the two of them had found another home. She wondered whether or not he was still making sketches of the sort which had caused her so much trouble.

Firelight from the hearth flickered through cracks in the walls, and when she sat up in bed, she could see Stoick's bulk moving about in the room below. The man shuffled to the kitchen and poured himself another mug of ale. He crossed the room and gently took Hiccup's tiny horned helmet off the hook. Stoick sat down on a chair by the flickering fire, and stared down at his son's helmet, deep in thought.

Did it even matter what had happened to Hiccup in the end? Perhaps one of the archipelago's long winters had killed him, and his night fury. Fishlegs was right; she had sworn her love to a ghost, but it mattered deeply to Stoick. Living with him had been easy tonight, but she wondered and dreaded the day the subject of Hiccup Haddock would come up in conversation.

The day she would have to support her terrible lie, and expand upon it.

* * *

><p>The following day occurred exactly as Stoick had predicted. Starting very early in the morning every clan in Berk big and small, weak and powerful, fishermen and farmers, all came to offer their congratulations to her. Most looked overjoyed at the idea of Astrid as heir. A few, like the Ingermans, maintained a very formal, neutral air.</p>

"I like that clan." Stoick told her, as they caught a moment's break. "They don't get involved in Politics. Just simple living. A good clan, the Ingermans. A good clan."

The Thorstons showed, giving Astrid fine green cloth to fashion new clothes from. She had to admit, she was looking forward to wearing something which was threadbare and passed down from one of her cousins.

Even Gobber made a showing. He never said a word to Stoick the entire time he was there, but he treated Astrid with kindness enough "I've go' no gift righ' now, but I've a shield on the way." He told her. "It'll go well with yer axe."

"Thanks, Gobber."

"Maybe some new shoulder pads too. Those are looking a little small on you." The smith said, eyeing her up. He was absolutely right. He said, "Come by the smithy, and I'll size you up."

Next came the Barrasons and the Finnasons, both of them bearing gifts of one kind or another.

Astrid's class came all together, dressed in their battle armour. Stoick left his post at Astrid's side for time in order to watch them spar, and teach them what he knew. The sounds of children's laughter, and the chief's booming voice carried throughout most of the afternoon.

It was early evening when the hammer fell.

The Jorgasons came to visit, carrying spices, several rare treasures, and a black bear pelt. The clan's representatives were the two Jorgasons whom Astrid wanted to see the least: Spitelout and Snotlout.

Snotlout offered the fur to Stoick, while Spitelout spoke to Astrid, shaking her hand. "I want to offer my congratulations to you. You've done very well for yourself, and this bodes well for our future."

"Thank you for the gift and your congratulations." Astrid said mechanically. "But I'm afraid it's been a long day, and—"

"Before we leave, we were wondering if we might discuss business with Stoick." Spitelout said, cutting her off. "I'm overjoyed at your success, but the island doesn't run itself." He gave Stoick a glance. "Does it, Brother?"

"No." Stoick studied him suspiciously. "Astrid's right. It has been a long day. Come in, then and speak your piece."

Astrid's heart sank as Stoick led them inside and showed them to the table. Snotlout gave her a leering wink as he passed, and she resisted the urge to plant her axe in his skull.

"Astrid, could you pour some ale, please." Stoick asked.

She crossed to the cupboard he had shown her the night before and pulled out three glasses.

"Are you not joining us, Astrid?" Spitelout asked from his seat. "This certainly concerns you."

Her heart sank further, but she dutifully pulled out a fourth glass and planted them on the table, sliding each one across- Snotlout's cup whipping across the surface considerably harder than necessary- to Stoick and his guests. She fetched a bottle of mead and poured Stoick a glass, then planted it on the table for Spitelout and Snotlout to help themselves, which Spitelout did, stepping easily over the insult. He poured her a glass as well, though she didn't touch it.

"I wish to be straight with you, Astrid, Stoick. I've come with a marriage proposal." Spitelout said.

"No." Astrid said immediately.

"Barely a day has passed, Spitelout." Stoick said angrily. "Can you not give us a moment's peace?"

"A moments peace is not a privilege chieftains can afford, isn't that right, brother?"

"I'm not marrying Snotlout, so you can pack up your gifts and go home!"

"I'm going to attribute that very grave insult to your exhaustion,

young Astrid." Spitelout said fairly. "Any heir the chief chose personally would carry herself with more dignity than that."

"I'm not marrying your son." She growled.

"You may not like it now Astrid," Snoutlout leaned back confidently, "But the moment you get a taste of the Snotman, you won't be able to help yourself."

"Snotlout, my knife will enter your throat before your cock gets anywhere near my—"

"Can weâ€¦ put aside our interpersonalâ€¦ difficulties for a moment?" Spitelout interrupted. He leaned forward. "Let us cut to the quick of it. Astrid, you're a Haddock now. The Haddocks have the most wealth on the island. You have the most sheep, and most of the island works your farms, but Berk itself is a fishing village, and the Jorgensons own the boats. I know you have some reservations, but a marriage will solidify the Haddock clan's power over the island and grant your rule legitimacy."

"My own competence will be all the legitimacy I need." She shot back.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Spitelout said. "The Jorgensons have always been generous with our boats. We've kept the fees generously low, knowing we had the trust and cooperation of the ruling clan. But if we're no longer alliedâ€¦"

"Let's not get carried away, Spitelout. We'll figure out a compromise." Stoick responded. Astrid turned and glared at him.

"You haven't taught her the economics, have you?" Spitelout tutted. "Shall I give you a lesson, young Astrid? The Jorgenson clan owns the shipyards and the docks. We build Berk's boats, and we rent them out to lesser fishing clans for a reasonable sum. But if we aren't going to be treated favourably by the ruling clan, then we're going to have to do what we can to protect our own interests."

"By charging Berk's fishermen through the nose." Stoick finished.

"It would be terrible if some of them couldn't keep up with payments. They'd end up being permanently indebted to us as much as you. Subject to our interests and obliged to follow our instructionsâ€¦"

"Well first of all, you just proved that your clan has absolutely no honour whatsoever if you're holding the entire Hooligan tribe hostage to a marriage." Astrid began. "Secondly, we'd stop you."

Spitelout smiled. "How, exactly? You can help them by paying us from your own funds for a time, but eventually you're going to have to raise taxes on the farmers to make up the costs of the fisherman doing business. You'll have to or the Haddock clan will go bankrupt, and then you'll lose all of your political clout, and we'll own the island anyway. And if you don't, then the Fisherman are paying too much, the farmers are paying too much, and where is your competency, Astrid? How far has it gotten you?"

"Careful of your tongue Spitelout." Stoick warned, laying his hands on the table. "It wanders very far from the protection of your closed mouth."

"Do you threaten this every time a negotiation doesn't go your way?" Astrid asked.

"We should!" Snotlout said. "Teach everyone exactly who's in charge! Dad! What was that for?"

Spitelout lowered his hand and said, "For being a fool, Snotlout." He addressed Astrid. "Every time? No. The island wouldn't stand for it, and the last thing we need are Berkians drawing each other's blood. Especially with the dragon raids. We only do this for things which we really, really value. Like succession."

Stoick said, "I adopted Astrid for two reasons. One, because I needed an heir."

"You have an heir."

"No, you have an heir. Snotlout is yours, not mine, brother."

"Don't talk about me like I'm some piece of meat!" Snotlout snapped, looking terribly offended. Without a trace of irony in his voice, he added, "We're here to buy Astrid, remember?"

"My first wedding gift will be Nadder venom in your wine." Astrid said cheerfully. "On our wedding day. From me to you, Snotlout. From me to you."

"Perhaps I wasn't being clear enough." Spitelout told Stoick, ignoring both of them, "Stoick, you had a Jorgenson heir. My sister Valka was a Jorgenson. Hiccup was a Jorgenson in everything but name. We had the throne. But now young Hiccup's gone, and leadership of the tribe belongs to Hofferson?"

"Excuse me?" Astrid glared at him.

"Astrid will be a Haddock now, and—"

"Not by blood!"

Stoick continued patiently, "And Hiccup would have married her anyway. The two were very close."

"And you didn't even know that until a few days ago."

Stoick took a single breath to calm himself and said, "It would have happened regardless."

Spitelout agreed. "You're right. Expect that poor Hiccup passed away."

"You don't sound particularly upset by that." Astrid observed coldly.

"I showed more grief at his funeral than you did." Spitelout replied evenly. "Strange, that."

"What exactly are you implying?" She glared at him, and he responded with a blank look.

He said, "Absolutely nothing. But you were going to marry a Jorgenson. All we're asking is that you don't change your plans, Astrid. I know my son can be difficult, but if you marry him, you'll still be in charge."

"Until I'm with child or Stoick's gone." Astrid snarled. "Don't think for a second you'll fool me with that kind of yakshit."

"Just be reasonable. Think it through. We can both do so much to make eachother's lives easier."

"Right now, you're making my life very difficult." Astrid said flatly. "Understand this: I will marry whomever I wish to, when I wish to. Not before. But I can promise you: It will not be Snotlout."

Spitelout leaned back in his chair and knitted his fingers together. He gave her a chilling smile and said, "We hear you're planning another raid, Astrid."

"Iâ€œ!" Astrid hesitated, glancing at Stoick. "I know how to get to the Nest. I can end this once and for all."

"But your solutionâ€œ!" Spitelout tutted. "Eels hanging from the rigging? Hiding our weapons? It's all a littleâ€œ!"

"Crazy." Astrid said. "Go ahead and say it, you bastard."

"I was going to say difficult to understand." Spitelout said delicately. He smiled at her. "Oh, I believe you. Of course I do. You're Astrid Hofferson. You don't lie. But other Vikings... you know how stubborn this village is. They aren't open to new ideas. One needs leverage."

"Just spit it out! Say what you're going to say! I'm out of patience." Astrid snapped.

"We can apply pressure, Astrid. You say you know how to end this war, but another trip to the nest is not going to be a popular move. Especially after the last one. No offense, Stoick."

"You're a snake, Spitelout."

"Astrid, the Jorgenson Clan can provide the power you need to take Berk there. We can provide the ships, and the men. But most importantly, we can provide the motivation for another fight. The attitude. You can end this war. Bring Berk into a new era. We'll help in any way we can. We want this too, and there's only one thing we need from you."

Astrid glared at him, and then at Snotlout.

"What is Berk's future worth?" Spitelout inquired.

"Iâ€œneed to think." She stood up, tripping over her chair and stumbling out the door. The sun was shining, but the air was bitter and cold, gnawing at her joints, and burning her cheeks. She stared

out across Berk towards the open sea. She briefly considered trying to find Fishlegs for advice, but knew the Jorgensons wouldn't wait that long for an answer. Her vision blurred as tears welled up in her eyes. She fumbled her axe off of her back and gripped it tightly in her hands, wringing the shaft as she searched desperately for a way to make it work.

No way outâ€| no way outâ€| no way outâ€|

She heard the crack, and felt the shock run up her arms. Her axe handle had snapped; twisted and splintered beyond use. She stared down at the broken weapon which hung limply from her grasp, and began to cry. It was the third time in her life she could remember crying.

It was another five minutes before she re-joined them. Spitelout, Snotlout, and Stoick were still sitting around the table when she marched back inside, holding her head high despite her puffy red eyes.

"Five years." She barked, tossing her broken axe onto the table. "I get five years as heir. As a free woman. No contracts. I'm not betrothed. I'm not promised. There's no fucking scythe hanging over my neck." She pointed to Spitelout and Snotlout. "I have your loyalty. And yours as well. The Jorgenson clan and your allies back me up. Starting with planning an assault on the Nest."

Spitelout laughed. "Five years? Try one year."

"Four."

"Two years."

"Just face it, Astrid. Even you won't be able to stay away that long. Not from the Snotman." Snotlout said

She planted her knuckles on the table. "On my wedding night, when you're in me, I'll be thinking of dogs and pigs and horses and tree branches because anything would be preferable to being in bed with you, Snotlout. Because that's how much I fucking hate you!"

For a moment, just a fraction of a second, Spitelout's smug look faded, recognizing the young woman's very real emotional anguish; it wasn't just about politics. Not for her.

"Three years." He said, taking pity. "Three years as a free woman. And then you marry my son. I'll try to teach him to smarten up and treat you right in the meantime."

"Hey!" Snotlout exclaimed indignantly.

Astrid stepped back, breathing heavily. "Three years. Fine. Just fine. I am a free woman."

"Chief," Spitelout said, "Is this acceptable to you?"

"Very little of what you've done here today is acceptable to me, Spitelout. But ultimately, it's Astrid's choice." Stoick turned to her. "This will get you what you want."

"Sir, Berk is falling apart. This might be our last chance, our only chance, to end the war." She stared down at her broken axe. "I'm willing to die for that. I suppose I should be willing to get married too."

"This is nothing personal, Astrid." Spitelout explained. "It isn't you we want."

"Speak for yourself." Snotlout added. His father cuffed him across the back of the head. "The Jorgenson clan is one of the founding clans of Berk, alongside the Thorstons, the Ingermans, the Hoffersons, and the Haddock's. We just want to insure that no matter what the future brings, our assets are secure. And I'm still worried by this agreement. Three years as a free woman, you could marry any number of other bachelors."

"But she won't." Snotlout said. "She doesn't understand the incredible gift she's been given yet, but you will, Astrid. Don't worry."

Astrid ignored him, but her fists clenched hard enough to turn the knuckles white. She said, "I think we both know you're going to shake down every eligible man on the island. There will be no suitors."

Spitelout smiled. "You learn fast, Astrid. Now, tell me about this raid you're planning, and the Jorgensons will see it done. You'll discover what kind of allies we can be."

* * *

><p>Those of you who are confused, disappointed or pissed off about what just happened at the end of this chapter, please be patient. Trust me. I don't pull this sort of stunt without a plan.

Most of the negotiation scene was written in consultation with Midoriko-Sama! So I want to thank her for everything. Please go give her stories a look. She recently posted a short story about an older Astrid telling her child a bedtime story. It belongs to the 'Wild Hearts' A.K.A. Feral!Hiccup AU, but It works regardless, and like all of her stories, it is more than worth the time to go read.

I know Alexandria is done with, but a reviewer named 'fate of the agarwaen' very kindly composed a list which covers most of the historical inaccuracies or misrepresentations which appeared in the Alexandria segment of this story. I've asked his permission to post them here.

**My story takes place at approximately 815AD. Many of the events on this list occurred earlier or later in history, but they do an excellent job of explaining what actually happened to Alexandria, and the state of the world at this period in History. **

**Plenty of the historical deviations in this story are mistakes (the vast majority, in point of fact), a few stem from assumptions I was forced to make because I did not have sufficient data to portray the events more accurately. A few, such as the currency, have been warped, altered, ignored, or condensed for the sake of plot convenience and character growth. **

**Where I knew I was deviating I tried my best to keep everyone informed, but I am an amateur historian, and an historian only in the loosest sense of the term. The reason I chose to include all of that history in the first place was because I wanted to share the passion I so recently found with other people. **

More than that, I felt that Hiccup needed a place to grow and nurture the skills and mindset which had made him such an outcast on Berk. I felt that there was no better place in all of ancient History for him to experience this, certainly none more iconic, than Alexandria.

Anywho I've rambled enough. Here's the list, edited a little to better compare what you just read in the story with reality:

**First of all, it was not the Umayyad Caliphate who conquered Alexandria - and, by extension, Egypt. Egypt and Alexandria fell about thirty years before the first Umayyad Caliph took the reigns of power; the Caliph then was the Arab empire's second one, Omar.
**

In addition, the Saracens/Muslims/Arabs didn't start minting their own currency until about seventy years or so after they conquered Egypt.

The First Crusade took place around the fifth century of the Islamic domination (1096-1099) - by which time the Umayyad Caliphate had fallen, as had its successor, the Abbasid Caliphate. The battles spoken of in this story were actually the Arab expansion up the Iberian Peninsula (Spain), which they took in the late eighth century and held for a very long time. They built the Alhambra in this era.

The Byzantine Emperor at the time of the Arab conquest of Egypt, when Alexandria actually fell, and a few centuries before this story takes place, was Heraclius.

**Although it seems very odd nowadays, the early Islamic empires were very much pro-science, pro-learning. Yes, the Greeks were the first to propose the mathematical proof for the world being round (and Eratosthenes performed his own startlingly accurate calculation), but the Arabs later found and refined the formula themselves, and calculated the earth's circumference to within a few hundred miles. The basic fact is that almost all of what we know of Ancient Greek science came back to Mediaeval Europe from the Middle East.
**

They scooped up, translated, studied and expanded on what the ancient Greeks and Romans learned. Then those translations got filtered back into Europe and there we go. Avicenna, Alhazen, these famous names of Mediaeval European learning? They're Muslim names, latinized.

**I'll admit I have done the scientific Muslim world of that time, and people like Al-Haytham (Alhazen) a bit of a disservice in this story. It is very likely much of what was kept in the Library would have been saved and studied, though scholars argue as to whether the cultural pieces (plays and histories and such) would have been saved

from the fire. Certainly the pure, objective mathematical and scientific studies would have survived a purge. The Muslim society was curious, progressive, and generally speaking far more tolerant of other peoples and religions than the Christian societies of the same period.**

I could have done more, I suppose, but to show the library surviving would have taken all the tension out of the plot, especially considering that that segment was about the death of a civilisation.

In actuality there were plenty of fires in Alexandria. Plenty of wars. But what probably happened to the library was that its collection rotted away because not enough people cared to maintain it. When scrolls were tossed in lieu of books, much of the collection didn't make it into the new medium, and the million scrolls with so much worldly knowledge rotted to dust in the library basement. Far less dramatic than blood and flames, eh?

There's an excellent BBC podcast called In Our Time. One of the episodes is about the rise and fall of the great Library of Alexandria. Anyone who is interested in the truth should go give it a listen.

Anywho that's all for now, folks. Next chapter the game changes.

25. Chapter 25

Prodigal Son 25

Fishlegs stepped carefully over a fallen log, and held back a branch to let Astrid pass him. "Three years. An interesting development."

"You're getting off on this."

"Not true, and I resent the implication."

"Were they bluffing, Fishlegs? Can they just raise taxes like that?" she hopped from rock to rock to avoid wading through a thick set of prickly bushes.

"They can't just raise fishing fees at will. If they collapsed Berk's economy, everyone would know who was really at fault. Sooner or later someone would call them out. It would be a much more intelligent move to increase taxes incrementally over a number of years. Say, six or seven. That way Berk slowly sinks into poverty, people forget about what Snotlout did in the Kill Ring, and they blame Stoick for hard times instead of recognizing the true culprits. I would guess that sort of play is also why they choose to operate in the background while Stoick takes the public's attention."

"Sounds familiar."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

Fishlegs ignored her pointed look. He said, "Out of curiosity, have you spoken to any other possible suitors?"

"Why bother? The Jorgensons will have worked them over already."

"Yes, I was about to say."

"I had to cooperate with them anyway." Astrid said, as much for her own benefit as for her companion's.

"You think so?"

"It's only been three days since I signed the second contract, and already we have a fleet of a dozen ships in the water. Half of Berk is mobilized and ready for war. We've collected eels from all over the shallows, and we're going to hang them from the rigging the moment we get close to the nest. The Jorgensons held up their end of the bargain, for what it's worth."

"It's like making a deal with Loki, though. You'll never get quite what you expect."

They reached a small six-foot high cliff, overgrown with shrubbery and questing tree roots. Astrid scrambled up easily and lay on her stomach at the top. "Hand me that basket of fish."

Fishlegs obeyed, slinging the item off of his back and holding it up for Astrid to grab. As she pulled it up, she said, "I didn't have much choice."

"You could have said no."

"Here, grab my hand." She reached down for him. Fishlegs obeyed, holding onto her with one hand, and a thick tree root with the other. They both strained for a few seconds as he struggled up the cliff, but he managed to scramble over the top, and they both lay there for a moment, breathing heavily.

Astrid got to her feet and dusted herself off. "Said no and then what? Watch the Jorgensons start trouble on Berk? Whether they tax us to death slowly or not, it's bad for the island. This way, I get their full cooperation, I get a fleet to attack the nest with, and after we clear the nest out and end the war, I have three years to break them." She reached down and helped pull Fishlegs to his feet. Once there, she looked him straight in the eye. "I need to be powerful, Fishlegs. Strong enough to say no to a written contract, and stomp them flat if they try to start trouble over it. I need your help."

"And what do the Ingemans get?"

"I'm sure you'll be able to work in a few benefits for yourselves somehow. You aren't demanding marriage from me. Help me break Snotlout's clan, and the Ingemans will take their place."

"Works for us. Though perhaps third or fourth, publicly." Fishlegs said as they resumed their early-morning journey to the cove. "The trouble with obvious power is that it requires maintenance and defense."

"Fishlegs?"

"Mmm?"

"How do I break the Jorgensons?"

"Well, I think it through, Astrid. What makes the Jorgensons strong?"

"They have plenty of warriors." She said slowly, "And they can tax the boats."

"And when one hand fails, they use the other."

"We're going to have to take down both at once, then." She decided, "We'll need a fleet. And an army."

"The Haddock clan has the money to build a fishing fleet to rival Spitelout's, and the moment you start handing boats to the fishermen, your support in Berk is going to rise. But the boat builders on Berk are all under the Jorgenson's thumb. If you want a fleet, you'll have to either bring in builders from outside the clan, or find a way to protect your workers from any blowback. We don't have an army, so secrecy is better than force of arms."

"That sounds complicated, though." Astrid said. "I mean, you need timber, iron, canvas, rope and plenty of hard labour, skilled and unskilled, to build a longship. Not to mention a shipyard. How do you keep all that a secret?"

"I don't know." Fishlegs admitted. "It's something to think about, certainly."

"I don't understand how Stoick let this happen. How did Spitelout gain so much power?"

"The Haddocks own the island of Berk. All the land, the farms and everything are Haddock territory, but the Jorgensons own the sea. When you live on an archipelago that gives you an advantage. It's just one they've never pressed before."

"Why not?"

"Because they've never had to. Stoick is a Jorgenson. Technically he's from the Haddock line, but politically, he and Spitelout are brothers. They're family. Besides, I know they're quarreling right now, but Stoick and Spitelout are at their core the same. They believe the same things. All dragons need to die, power is best wielded with a hammer. They both respect physical prowess in battle more than mental strength, or strength of character, even. Stoick has a much softer touch, but don't be fooled. Those two are very similar people and they'd run Berk in very similar ways."

"Stoick isn't like them!"

"He's not as blunt as they are, but he comes from the same camp. Appearances mean everything, and Stoick appears to be a moderate. He treats you well out of sympathy and a sense of duty to Hiccup's memory, but don't forget he tried to exile you when he felt you

threatened those memories."

"I didn't, thanks."

They walked on in silence. Eventually Fishlegs asked, "Did you tell anyone else about the deal?"

Astrid scoffed. "No. how the hell am I supposed to break that one to my parents?"

"Don't" he recommended. "Leave it to me."

"Why? What are you going to do, Fishlegs?"

"Play the hand I'm dealt. We can turn this against the Jorgensons, you know. We just have to bring the truth forward at the right time."

"And now isn't?"

"It depends on how we proceed, but I think it's best we keep this one to ourselves for now. You lost some support when the Jorgensons started to rope everyone into another raid, saying you had a plan."

"Iâ€œI did?" Astrid hesitated, her heart sinking even further. She didn't want to be hated. This was the right way forward! They could end the war and solve the dragon raiding problem for good."

"Yep." Fishlegs nodded, "But it'll get worse when everyone finds out you have a dragon. The Jorgensons may have done you a favor. I'll keep my ear to the ground and we'll see if we can't turn this thing around."

Astrid stopped and turned to look at him. "You're a great help, Fishlegs, but I'm scared of the moment when you and I don't agree on what's best for Berk."

Fishlegs shrugged, once again twiddling his fingers innocently. "I can't really see that happening any time soon."

"I know. It's just a worrying thought."

They reached the cove at dawn, and shuffled through the narrow entrance.

"Stay here." Astrid ordered. She moved further into the clearing. "Stormfly? Stormfly!"

At the other end of the clearing, on the edge of the bowl, the Deadly Nadder appeared, chirping quietly in response to Astrid's voice. Fishlegs, already across the clearing, backed away a little further.

"There you are, Girl! Come on down here! There's someone I want you to meet." Astrid turned. "Fishlegs, grab a salmon and get- what are you doing?"

Fishlegs was busy flipping his way through the book of dragons. He had placed a pile of other papers on a nearby rock, and Astrid

recognized it as the last remaining copy of Hiccup's journal.

"Are you serious?"

"According to the Book of Dragons, The Deadly Nadder is easily recognized by the bright blue body and brilliant yellow spikes that cover it head to tail. This colorful dragon is active any time of the day or night. Nadders are quick and agile in the air and can fly for long distances, but will almost always land before attacking. Nadders travel and raid in groups, making them especially dangerous. The Deadly Nadder isn't the largest or fastest dragon, but it possesses the hottest fire in the dragon world. The blast of a Nadder can melt steel, or turn a man to ash in seconds. But the dangers of the Nadder don't stop there. The tail of the Nadder can be whipped around, releasing a volley of giant spikes that can penetrate trees, walls, and Vikings."

"Fishlegs, put the stupid book down, get over here and give my Nadder a fish!"

"What if it bites my hand off? I don't want to end up like Gobber! I need my hands!"

"That's the point, stupid! It's a trust exercise. Like in Hiccup's journal."

"I'd really prefer to do the research and understand this first."

"You've known we were going here since yesterday! Why didn't you do your research then?"

"This seemed like such a good idea last night! And I have a baby, in case you forgot!" he shot back. "How am I supposed to hold my child if I don't have hands?"

Astrid growled in frustration, amazed that the man who normally had such a subtle intelligence about him, was reduced to this. Hiccup was right about one thing: the hostility and fear between Vikings and dragons was marrow deep. She said, "You're not going to lose your hands!"

"I don't have a weapon."

"You don't need a weapon!"

"I don't feel safe!"

"So that's it then? You're all for Hiccup's idea until it means you have to step in the ring with them yourself? You've faced down dragons before, Fishlegs. I've watched you kill them!"

"It's different when you're in a shield wall, and you've got a club and a shield and other Vikings with you. I'm not exactly what you'd call a 'hands on' person, Astrid."

"Stormfly?" The Nadder, who had been nuzzling her and pecking lovingly at her hair, which Astrid had carefully combed, remembering Stormfly's aversion to knots, perked up attentively. Astrid pointed at Fishlegs. "There's fish over there. Go find it, girl!"

Silence dropped across the cove as Stormfly looked up and met Fishlegs' worried gaze.

Then the dragon charged. Fishlegs let out a high-pitched yelp and dove out of the way as it rushed towards him.

"Who's a good girl?" Astrid called out dotingly, from somewhere in the background.

The Nadder pinned Fishlegs to the ground and leaned down to sniff at him. It licked him several times, but grew bored when it realized he wasn't a fish, and moved on to sniffing at the basket he had been carrying. The dragon emitted a triumphant squawk, then picked up the basket in its teeth and trotted back to Astrid.

"Good girl! You're such a good girl, Stormfly! Yes you are!" Astrid crooned, scratching the dragon's scales and smoothing her spines. She paused to open up the basket, snatching a few fish away before the dragon dove in.

Fishlegs had recovered by this point, and marched up to Astrid, shuffling Hiccup's journal back into proper order as angrily as he could. He jabbed a finger at her. "That was not dignified!"

"Oh, suck it up, Guppielegs." She handed him the fish. "Hold it out for her."

"I don't like Nadders." Fishlegs babbled as she shoved him towards her dragon. "They're- Please don't push me- they move too fast."

Stormfly whirled around, having finished her meal. She sniffed at the salmon in Fishlegs' hand, and chirruped at him, twitching her head back and forth to examine him with both eyes.

"You're doing great, Fishlegs. Now hold your hand out."

The man extended his arm, cringing. "A Nadder killed my uncle, you know."

"Everyone's lost someone to a dragon." Astrid said grimly, remembering the way the Flightmare had gobbled up Fearless Finn, "That's what we're trying to beat here, isn't it?"

"I'd still feel safer with a shield."

Stormfly sniffed at the fish, and then curled its tongue around Fishlegs' hand, slurping up its treat, and leaving his limb intact. The man stood there, stiff as a board, while the dragon sniffed him up and down, looking for the other fish, which he was holding behind his back. "This is the most nerve-wracking thing I've ever done." He said shakily.

"Easy. She just wants the other fish."

"Oh. Well that's easy!" he made to hold it out, but Astrid stopped him. "Noâ€¦ she has to give you something now. She has to let you pet her. Hold out your empty hand."

Fishlegs laughed. "Okay, you know what? I'd be happy just giving it to her."

"In one day I'm leaving for the nest. If we fail then you'll be Berk's last chance." Astrid pushed Stormfly out of the way and planted her hands on her hips, "I've told your lies and gone along with your ideas and you've turned my life upside down. I said you owed me now it's time to pay up! Can you do this, or not?"

Fishlegs sighed and stared down at his slobber-covered hand. "Alright. Alright. But when I get a dragon, it's going to be something slow. Something predictable. Like a Gronckle."

"Just do it!"

"I'm going, I'm going. Don't rush me!" He held out his hand and tensed as the Nadder leaned forward for a closer look. Stormfly sniffed his hand, and then nuzzled it with a gentleness which surprised him.

"That's a good girl." Astrid comforted quietly as Fishlegs slowly forced himself to relax. She moved to the side and began to stroke her Nadder's flank. "There's a good girl. You can give her the other fish, now."

Fishlegs held out his other hand, a little more confidently this time. The Nadder gobbled up the treat and, after making sure he didn't have a third on him, curled up in a contented circle. Astrid led him around, letting him pet the Nadder, and talk to her quietly.

"It's strange." He said, looking down at the lethargic creature. "It would be so easy to kill her."

"There was a moment where I could have." Astrid admitted. "She was curled up like this and I had my knife with me. But I just couldn't do it. Once they trust you, you can't kill them. It'd be like killing a puppy or a calf or something. It's just the wrong thing to do." She took a deep breath. "Fishlegs—"

"I know what you're going to ask, Astrid. And yes, if you don't come back, I'll take care of her."

"Thanks." She said quietly, staring down at the sleeping dragon, and wondering what tomorrow held in store.

* * *

><p>Astrid was in command of the lead boat. She and Stoick together. Snotlout with his entourage took up the second, and Spitelout with several supporters took up the third. They had fourteen ships in total, each commanded by a Jorgenson warrior or one of their allies.</p>

Stoick had been correct when he said it would take all three of them. The poorer clans had fallen in line, though Astrid was unsure how many of them trusted Stoick and herself, and how many were doing it merely to please the Jorgensons. They had warriors from every clan on the island. Hundreds, in point of fact. It was the largest attacking army Berk had ever assembled for a raid. As per Astrid's

instructions, all metal objects had been stowed away in the loot chests which served double duty as rowing benches. Each boat had a barrel full of water and live Eels, to be killed and strung from the rigging as they approached Helheim's gate.

She had sat before a tribunal of Jorgenson warriors and explained her plan. A few had laughed. One or two had called her crazy. Then Spitelout and Snotlout had stood and proclaimed their support. Stoick had as well, and they made it clear that nothing she said was up for negotiation. Protest had died there and then.

Bard Barrason was on Astrid's boat, and she met his eye several times during the journey. The look he gave her was not exactly hostile, but certainly not friendly.

The sudden decision had thrown the island into confusion, and no one seemed to know exactly what part Astrid had to play. Rumors had spread that the plan was hers, but whether Stoick and Spitelout had heard of her theories and decided to chance it, or whether she was the architect was unclear. Arguments had flown back and forth across the rapidly fracturing island. Those who sided with the Jorgensons declared their support for Astrid's leadership. Those who didn't felt that she was being used.

Staying true to the promise she had given Fishlegs, she hadn't told anyone of the deal she had made with Spitelout. The look of shock her mother Brunhilda had given her upon discovering that Berk was once again sailing off to war was going to haunt her in the wee hours of the morning.

Astrid wore the blackbear furs which the Jorgensons had given her, and a tunic made of the green cloth the Thorstons had supplied. It was important to present a united front. Especially given the apparent insanity of the orders their troops would have to obey. Authority had to be absolute. No metal could be worn openly, and they would just have to trust that the eels would drive the larger dragons away.

"They're keeping watch even now." Stoick said, nudging her side and pointing skywards.

Astrid looked up, and saw a flask of blue and green; the tiny shape of a Nadder.

Stormfly was following the boats.

"Steady!" she called out as a few other sailors began to point skywards. "Steady! Remember: no weapons. Not until we reach the nest itself." She could hear similar orders being passed along the fleet. She looked skywards and prayed that the dragon stayed away.

"How are we supposed to protect ourselves?" Bard Barrason demanded.

"The eels will do that for us. But if you lose your cool, we won't survive."

"Eels?" the crew scoffed.

"Dragons hate eels. It's in the Book of Dragons!" Astrid shot back

coldly. "Are you saying Bork the Bold was wrong?"

They quieted. No one wanted to contradict an ancestor like Bork. The man was a legend. Second only to Hamish II Haddock, the man who had transformed the Isles of Berk from a Meathead fishing outpost into its own tribe, and carved out a large slice of the archipelago as Hairy Hooligan territory. Even if they were suspicious of Astrid, Stoick and Spitelout, they knew they could at least rely on Bork.

"My ass is on the line too." Astrid reminded them. "We're all in this battle together."

"There's another one!" Someone else called out, pointing upwards. Astrid squinted and shaded her eyes from the sunlight. There was indeed another black speck against the blue. A dragon, its wings spread, riding the winds high above their heads, though it was too far away to make out what breed.

* * *

><p>The wall of fog was visible from a mile off. As soon as it came into sight, Astrid turned to Stoick. "Order the other boats to hang their eels from the rigging."</p>

The order was passed across the water from boat to boat. Each captain, A Jorgenson or a Thorston, handed out instructions to a few of the sailors. Astrid rolled up her sleeve, took the top off the barrel she had been keeping by the bow, and thrust her hand in, grasping a slimy creature and pulling it out. It slithered and struggled in her hand so she slapped it against the gunwhale as hard as she could, killing it. She pulled out her knife, bore a hole in its tail, and ran a small leather strap through. She handed the dead eel to Stoick and it was passed gingerly down to the back of the boat, where a Sigurdson sailor tied it to the sternpost.

The procedure was repeated across the fleet, with eels being passed down and fixed to the shrouds and rigging, and tied to the gunwhales. It was fortunate that eels were a common catch in the waters around Berk. Eggs were carried by ocean currents from the distant Eel Island, and left in tidal pools and inlets all around Berk. It had simply been a matter of picking them out from the fishermen's latest catch and saving them instead of throwing them away.

By the time the fleet was done hanging the creatures from their rigging, they had reached the wall of fog. Each ship looked strange, garnished as they were with the long, slimy, dead shapes. The Viking sailors examined each other's boats with trepidation. None of them looked overly confident in Astrid's plan. Yet they obeyed their skippers, and their skippers answered ultimately to her.

"All metal stowed away!" Astrid called out. "I don't want to see a single knife out, or you'll doom us all!"

Perhaps the thieving dragons would steal the weapon. Perhaps they would steal the Viking carrying it as well. Either way, Astrid knew that seconds after one Viking was touched, every ship would be bristling with metal objects and then the entire raid, all her preparations, and the promises she had made to Spitelout and his bastard son would be for nothing.

The fog grew closer and closer until it swallowed them. The world vanished, replaced with fog, preventing them from seeing more than a few meters in any direction. The boats which had been following so close behind them were mere shadows in the murky, colorless gloom.

"Steady!" Astrid called out, aware of the way the fog deadened her voice. "Steady! Captains sound off!"

"Aye!" Called out Spitelout from a shadow to starboard.

"Aye!" shouted Snotlout, somewhere to port.

The other captains echoed the call from down the line.

"Remember, all metal stowed away!" Astrid called. Confirmations sounded from the rest of the fleet.

"Take down the sails, and ready your oars!" Again the orders were passed down, their voices faint, deadened by the oppressive fog.

Astrid stared in the mist ahead of her. She took a deep breath, remembering the disaster of their last attempt. Stoick's large hand gripped her shoulder. "Everything alright, Astrid?"

"I'm fine." She said, collecting herself. "It's just the moment of truth, you know?"

"I trust you." He said, and the vote of confidence was intensely comforting.

An undulating, thrumming noise filled the air. It was an alien, and hostile sound. A night-time noise, like crickets, or hooting owls, but corrupt and distorted. The sort of vibrations which crawled up one's spine, and left hairs standing on end. One thing was perfectly clear: the dragons everywhere were being made aware of their presence. The nest was on high alert.

There was a difference, though: last time they hadn't heard this. The noise of a hundred beating wings. Calls for calm and steadiness rang from every boat as shadows and shapes began to dart back and forth in the fog. A dark shape came towards them, slowly gaining detail as it drew nearer until it halted in front of Astrid at the bow of the boat. The crew tensed as it fluttered to a halt, but she held up a hand to the side, willing them to stay calm. If any of them so much as drew a sword, it would all be over.

The creature hovered in front of her, a foot away. Astrid held her ground, aware of the edgy Vikings all around her. She could see its rippling dark grey scales, and the beady yellow eyes, narrowing into hostile slits as it gave her a thorough examination. The mouth was small, but its jaws were wide and intensely powerful. Powerful enough to cut and shape metal. The skull-like formation on the top of its head was bone-white and scarred. She could smell its foul odors as it sniffed her up and down, circling slowly.

The sailors on her boat all tensed up. Stoick's hands had formed into fists, and he stood to the side, ready to grab the creature if it

decided to attack her. Astrid did nothing at all, aware that showing fear would weaken the crew's resolve. Instead she remembered Stormfly and that vital fact of Hiccup's journal: Dragons were animals. They attacked when given reason, but were otherwise gentle. It was difficult to believe, staring into the creature's angry yellow eyes, but Astrid steeled herself and waited.

The dragon sniffed her a couple times and then, to the astonishment of the crew, lost interest and began to wander the boat, sniffing for metal. The sailors ducked and swore and struggled to keep out of its way, but none of them raised a hand against it; they had all seen Astrid's display of restraint, and they took strength from her confidence and resolve.

The tiny dragons circled the boats for an entire nerve-wracking hour before taking their leave. It took the Vikings almost half that time to work up the nerve to start rowing. The swarm weaved in and out between the ships, sniffing around and searching for metal, but the sailors had the disciplined Jorgenson warriors, and determined captains at the helms of their ships, and Astrid's orders were carried down through the ranks effectively. No swords were drawn. The weapons were kept locked safely away in their trunks.

Slowly but surely, the fleet began to wind its way through the fog, following Astrid and Stoick's leading vessel. Seat stacks began appearing around them, growing thicker and thicker as they sailed further and further in. Occasionally they passed rotted wrecks, centuries old, covered in barnacles and seaweed; other failed attempts. With each one they passed, the Vikings' confidence grew. They were getting closer than their ancestors had done. As they meandered further and further into the mist, the swarms slowly wore away, their slow ominous hum replaced by a far more worrying noise: the whumph of large wings, and the guttural calls of the larger dragon breeds. Shadows began to filter through the fog, forming shapes on the water's churning surface: Gronckles, Nadders, Zipplebacks and Nightmares. The smaller fog-breathing dragons dissipated, fearful of their larger brethren.

There was an angry roar, and a Monstrous Nightmare coloured in purples and dark orange patches swooped out of the sky and banked around towards their boat. Bard Barrason stood up in his seat and fished around for a weapon. In three strides Astrid reached him, pulled him away, and slammed the lid shut. The Nightmare was nearly upon them when she held up a dead eel, tossing it into the ocean between them and the dragon. She saw the moment when the Nightmare picked up that hated scent. Its eyes and nostrils widened. It let out a strangled cry and flapped wildly, trying to slow its approach and gain some altitude. A gust of wind struck the boat, rocking it dangerously from side to side, but the Nightmare was already fleeing.

A cheer went up from the boats behind, ones who had seen the creature turn its tail and flap away as fast as it could go.

"Still laughing, Bard?" Astrid asked through gritted teeth. The Viking warrior stared up at her in amazement.

"How did you know?" He asked.

"I already told you, idiot! They hate eels. It's in the book of

dragons." She tossed him back onto his seat and addressed the rest of her stunned crew. "Oars out! Keep rowing! Let's see if the beasts test us further!" She strode easily back up the length of the ship to join Stoick at the bow.

The warrior pointed ahead. Past the sea stacks, they could see the faint outline of a tall, volcanic mountain.

"Great Odin's ghost!" she said, "The Nest." Above them, dozens of dragons wheeled, but none dared approach. The smell of the eels was too strong, and it drove them all away.

Stoick smiled like a lion. He clapped her on the shoulder, soldier to soldier. "You did it, Astrid. You got us there. After three hundred years and fifteen generations, you've brought us to the nest. This is a new chapter of Berk's history."

* * *

><p>The grey pebbled shore of the nest itself lay before them. The worried thrumming which had permeated the air was louder than ever before. Dragons wheeled high above the heads of the apprehensive Viking fleet, circling the mountain itself. The volcanic behemoth towered over their trifling ships; a titanic black monolith. A stalagmite from depths of Hel's realm which had pierced straight through the heart of Midgard, and carried the disease of dragons with it to the world of men.</p>

The first vessel reached the shore and ran aground, pebbles scraping along the keel. A shroud hung over the scene, as if the ships had passed through the foggy void, and had entered another realm entirely. One made of cold, dark waters, joyless grey sky and bitter black stone.

Stoick leapt over the side and landed on the shore: the first Viking to ever set foot on that gods forsaken, tormented land. The moment his feet touched the ground, the thrumming noise stopped. Silence hung breathless in the air as every Viking awaited the black mountain's answer to their leader's trespassing.

It offered them nothing. Yet a sudden seed of doubt arose in the back of every man's mind. They were somewhere they weren't supposed to be. In this war, a line had been crossed. Stoick rose from his crouch and pulled out his hammer. He turned back to the boats, and shouted "Arm yourselves and assemble the catapults! We've a war to win!"

Astrid obeyed, pulling out an axe, along with a bow and quiver full of arrows. Other Vikings followed, growing more apprehensive with every step they took on the dragons' island. They were in the heart of enemy territory, and they knew instinctively that the battle ahead would redefine the entire war. Whether or not it would end in their favor remained to be seen.

Two hours later, Berk's forces had set up according to Stoick's instructions. The mountain was volcanic, and hollow. They could see clouds of dragons high above, streaming in and out of a gaping maw at the monolith's peak. The surface nearest to their boats was an almost vertical flat rockface. The fog around it was constantly churning, being sucked inwards through invisible cracks in the wall, as if the mountain itself were taking a breath. It was chosen as the breach

point.

Siege engines, carried from Berk, were constructed on the beach. Stakes were cut and placed in defensive lines across the beach to protect the Viking army from charging gronckles. Net traps and razor-wire bolas launchers, all of them of Hiccup's design, were set up at strategic points, defending troop formations, but primarily the siege engines, from an expected aerial assault. The troops themselves were split up into divisions. The burliest Vikings were at the front, forming shield walls. Behind them came pikemen and archers, all facing towards the mountain. Astrid had the right flank, Spitelout and Snotlout the left. Stoick took the center.

"When we crack this mountain open, all hell is going to break loose." He said, tracing their battle plans in the sand.

"We're ready, sir." Astrid said confidently. Spitelout and Snotlout both nodded.

Stoick rose to his feet and took a few steps towards the mountain. "No matter how this ends, it ends today." He reached up into the air, and closed his hand into a tight fist. Immediately the catapults began to bombard the rock wall with massive chunks of stone.

It didn't take long for them to break through. The wall was already full of cracks. It was a simple matter of finishing the job. Projectiles pounded into the rock face, knocking crater after crater into the wall until it finally collapsed inwards, forming a large triangular cavern. Berk's army tensed, expecting a sudden rush of angry dragons, yet once again the mountain failed to answer their challenge.

Stoick clambered up the debris to the cavern's edge and peered into the darkness, his hammer at the ready. He signaled for a ball of flaming pitch to be flung into the breach.

The flickering projectile passed over his head and down the length of the tunnel. Light from its flames illuminated the walls, every surface crawling with dragons of all types. Hundreds upon hundreds of them. Writched and skittered through the meager light. Stoick roared at them and charged in, hammer swinging. At the same time, like a swarm of bats they burst from the darkness and flooded the open air. The Vikings responded immediately, firing waves of arrows, nets and razor-wire into the swarm. Dozens of dragons dropped out of the sky, dead or wounded. Pikemen moved in to finish them off. The flood itself ended, but instead of the pitch battle the Vikings had expected, the swarm was heading skywards, flying away from the mountain as fast as they could go, and ignoring the Berkians entirely. Soon enough, the skies were completely empty.

The Vikings muttered to each other in confusion, glancing around for some explanation. "Is that it?" a few asked. "We came here for a battle, and now they flee?" Stoick reappeared at the cavern's mouth, looking as befuddled as the rest of them. Spitelout threw up his hands and turned away.

Astrid was watching the wounded dragons which were scattered across the beach. They were yowling and yammering and struggling weakly, crawling towards the water as fast as they could with their torn wings and bleeding hides. She felt a twinge of pity for them,

accompanied by a great deal of shame. She suppressed both feelings, aware that it was neither the time, nor the place for a crisis of conscience.

Besides, the dragons were terrified, but not of the Vikings. They were fleeing the mountain itself. A sense of dread overtook her as she realized the Nest had something else to offer. Something even the dragons feared. "Reform your ranks!" she ordered, turning to her flank. "This isn't over! Reform your ranks! Hold together!"

At that very moment something in the mountain roared. A long, rending cry which shook the very earth on which they stood. A blast of hot air rushed out of the cave along with the smell of foul dragonbreath. A steady rumbling began to shake the world, but Astrid was truly worried when Stoick the Vast, who had been standing inside the breach itself, leapt down onto the beach and began to sprint towards the Viking lines at high speed, a look of terror on his face.

"Get clear!" he shouted, waving his hammer, "Get to the boats!"

The shadows in the breach behind him were moving, fading. The gaping cavern emitted a breath of dust, and then a massive creature crashed through the rock face to confront the Viking army. The titan stood taller than any tree in Berk's forests. Its feet alone could crush buildings, and the coral-like spines which ran down the length of its back were each taller than a man. Its jaws opened wide enough to swallow a longship, and when its roar split the air, the power of its breath was enough to catch the sails of two of the longships and forced them back out into the inky water.

It had a boney frill on top of its bulbous head, like a horrible twisted echo of Stormfly's beautiful spines. The beast was old, too. Its horns were broken and dulled through centuries of use. The skin was black and grey, covered in ash, as if the creature were hewn from the very rock it had lumbered out of. There was only one explanation for the horrendous beast which towered over their heads, roaring into the foggy maze of sea stacks: The black mountain really was a stalagmite from the underworld, and one of Loki's twisted children had crawled up through it into Midgard.

The beast reared onto its high legs until it stood high above the fog, able to see to the edges of its domain, and when it landed, its weight drove its massive clawed feet meters into the ground. The shockwave ran through the Viking ranks with the power of an earthquake, sending entire divisions stumbled to their knees. Arrows began to fly from archers around the battlefield, thumping into its thick, tough hide like pine needles in the fur of a wild, angry boar. The darts did nothing, and Astrid was not even convinced the creature had noticed the arrows at all.

Stoick was beside her, having survived the beast's initial charge, when half the mountain had collapsed around it.

"What is that thing?" She demanded.

"Odin help us!" he said, his eyes wide. "We can't win this."

The behemoth roared again and turned its attentions downwards at the beach, and at the Vikings who stood upon it. Their carefully arranged battle lines had vanished. Panic-stricken Berkians were running in

any direction possible, so long as their feet carried them further from the god-like monster.

"Catapults!" Stoick shouted, gathering his wits. Thankfully several crews were still responsive to orders. The machines were adjusted, and they let fly enormous stones which struck the beast's head and shoulders, though they might as well have been tossing pebbles at a yak for all the harm it did the creature.

They drew its attention at least. The beast bent down to give the siege engines a closer look. Then all at once it moved. With a speed and ferocity which terrified everyone who saw it, the behemoth reared up once again and dipped its head, clamping an entire catapult in its jaws and crunching it easily into so much kindling. The crew who manned it survived, thankfully, and fled towards the boats, which was where most of the Vikings were headed.

Astrid's world crystallized when she watched the beast's alien eyes. Its angered gaze flickered from the fleeing Vikings, to the ships, and back again.

It was thinking, she realized, dread seeping through her. It knew what the Vikings were trying to do. It began to breathe inwards, collecting its breath for a fireball which would no doubt take out the fleet, and three quarters of Berk's army in one blast.

She ran forward, taking up a fallen spear in her hand. She had no energy to scream. Instead she put all of her effort into throwing it like a javeline. The projectile arced upwards, and hit the beast in the eye. It slammed its eyes shut and lurched sideways, blowing a cloud of undetonated gas out into the open air, a safe distance from the Viking fleet.

Then, ships forgotten, it turned to the side, focused entirely on her. All she could see was its bulbous head, with enormous jaws, fangs like spears, and those beady grey eyes which bored through her soul. It had intelligence, of an ancient, fiendish and bestial variety. All of its hostility was now focused directly on her, memorizing every line in her face. She had managed to bother it, and now her life was at an end. She slung the axe off of her shoulder and gripped it tightly. If this was the end, then she was going to die holding a weapon. She was going to Asgard! Air rushed around her, pulling her towards its cavernous maw as the behemoth breathed inwards.

"Astrid!" she heard Stoick yelling faintly behind her, but sound had nearly ceased, perhaps it was being pulled into the creature's powerful lungs along with everything else including her. The pull stopped suddenly, and Astrid saw more green gas gathering in the creature's mouth as it prepared to flame.

She heard a faint chirping noise, and saw a green and blue blur, whipping along the behemoth's body.

Stormfly arrived as the monster's flame arced out. Nadder claws gripped Astrid's limp shoulders and she found herself being carried off into the sky, even as the sand and pebbles beneath her were turned to smooth, molten glass. The heat was unbearable, and she shut her eyes and turned her head away. The wolrd inside her eyelids turned a bright orange, and she felt the skin on her face redden and

burn, as if she had spent several afternoons out on the water without a cap. All at once it ended, and she opened her eyes.

The monster shrank by a small amount as Stormfly gained some height. It glared up at them furiously. Behind it, Astrid could see the longships, filled with Vikings. The first was starting to push away from the shoreline and out towards the sea stacks.

Even as the world shrank away, the behemoth was turning away from her, back towards them. Her fellow Vikings. The very men and women she had led to that gods forsaken island.

If even one of them died? No!_

She began to kick and scream impotently. "Stormfly, stop! Put me down! We have to go back! We have to go back!"

The Nadder flipped her up into the air, and for a moment she was free-falling. Then she landed on Stormfly's back. But they were still going in the wrong direction! She tugged impotently at her dragon's frill. "Let me back you stupid beast! We have to save them! If we don't do something, they're all going to die!"

The Nadder let out an alarmed squawk, and halted, flapping her wings to keep them airborne, and staring straight ahead of them, into the clouds. Astrid struggled for a moment longer to turn them around, but she too came to a halt, finally noticing what lay ahead of them.

Something strange was happening to the cloud formations. They were being altered. Sucked together into a cone, as if painted on a canvas where a loose tread was being tugged. They were forming a swirling cone of mist, at the tip of which was a tiny black shape, growing closer by the millisecond, and moving at a speed Astrid could scarce imagine. She ducked low against her Nadder's back, preparing for a fight.

Like an arrow, or a bolt of black lightning, the shape flashed past her, stealing the breath from her lungs. With it came a mighty gust of wind which nearly knocked Stormfly out of the sky. Yet what was more important to Astrid was the sound the apparition had made. A high-pitched whistling noise which brought back ancient memories of darkness, fear and blue fire.

Then the apparition spread its wings with an audible leathery whumph, and what had been faint, wild, and momentary speculation became instant, harsh reality. For the briefest moment she witness the dragon's profile, Astrid recognized in it the sketch Hiccup Haddock had left in the book of dragons. She noticed the muscular, bat-like wings, shuddering against the air pressure, the diamond-shaped head, with its strange nubs and elongated ears. She noticed the two lower fins and the long black tail. She noticed the prosthetic leather fin, and the careful machinery which traced lines across the body of the Night Fury.

Astrid noticed the tall, lanky rider, hunched in his saddle, who had turned back to look at her as they flashed by. For a moment, through his mask, she met his brilliant green eyes. She knew that the only thing in the world which could have matched the stunned look in his eyes, was the equally shocked expression on her face. The apparition

vanished into the fog of Dragon Island, which curled after it, sucked into its wake.

Astrid knew then that all of her expectations, all of her hopes and dreams for Berk's future, all of Fishlegs' best laid plans were about to come undone. Stoick was right: this was a new chapter in Berk's history. A page had just been turned. After eight long years Hiccup Haddock, Berk's lost heir, was back.

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><p>Now it gets fun ;)

26. Chapter 26

Soooâ€œ I see you all enjoyed my cliffhanger.

* * * Ahem * * *

keeps typing

* * *

><p>Prodigal Son 26

Stoick the Vast stared blankly up at the mottled grey sky. His face was burned, he knew. How badly was anyone's guess, but he could smell burnt hair. Sharp rocks were digging into his back, and his armor felt far heavier than it had a few minutes before. His mind had gone blank for a few seconds. The behemoth's fireball had blasted him a few yards backwards, and the landing had been hard, heavy and fast.

At least he was still alive. Poor Astrid. A Nadder had snatched her away at the last second. How had this all gone so wrong? Was there any limit to the Gods' injustices? Three hundred years of blood and death, and the last bright light manages to help them find their way to the Nest and end the conflict, only to be scooped off the battlefield and murdered.

Then there was the behemoth itself. A child of Loki, or Jormungand perhaps. The devil responsible for all of Berk's strife. Never in his worst nightmares would Stoick have guessed that this demigod was what lay at the heart of Dragon Island. If he had, he would never have agreed to send the fleet here.

The Fleet!

In a flash, Stoick was on his feet. The monster was turning its back on him, lumbering slowly towards the fleeing Vikings. Half of Berk's vessels were in the water now, rowing desperately for the sea stacks, yet none lay beyond the flames of behemoth. The monster let out an angry cry which split the sky and drove the Vikings to their knees. It opened its massive, heavy jaws, collecting breath for another fireball, and Stoick realized there was absolutely nothing he could do but watch helplessly from the shoreline as Berk's entire fleet

burned.

Then he heard it. A whistling noise. One which hadn't been heard near Berk in eight? Ten years?

He heard the cries from the Viking longships: "NIGHT FURY! GET DOWN!"

A night fury on top of everything elseâ€”Odin's ghost, the gods had no mercy at all. He turned towards the whistling noise, shield and hammer at the ready. Sure enough, a night fury was dropping out of the clouds at incredible speeds. Its demonic black wings were spread wide to slow it down. Thin wisps of white fog had formed at its wingtips, tracing the path of its steep descent. Despite everything, Stoick felt a burst of pleasure. A hated enemy had returned. Perhaps he would be able to snatch some small victory from the jaws of defeat.

The small black dragon was dropping out of the sky at a rapid pace. Four-hundred feet, three-hundred feet, two-hundredâ€”

At one hundred feet, the night fury levelled off, using the power its descent to speed up. It whipped past Stoick making him stumble as he was hit by the powerful gusts of wind which followed it. The dragon itself, however, seemed to ignore him. It sped past him, across the beach towards the behemoth, and towards the boats as well.

"NO!" Stoick yelled, running towards his Viking army, but there was no way to reach them in time; the giant monster was already starting to flame.

A blast of blue fire burst forth from the night fury's mouth, shot across the grey beach, and hit the behemoth in the jaw, detonating with a powerful blast which engulfed the monster's face in blue and white fire. The impact drove the monster sideways, sending it stumbling to its knees. Its own fiery blast went wide of the ships, turning a patch of empty ocean to steam. The night fury slipped upwards, careening back towards the heavens, only to fall backwards into a dive and fire a second, blinding blast at the monster's flank.

Stoick slid to a halt, watching as the creature crashed to its side with an impact which shook the beach and sent waves out as far as the seastacks. The ships were safe, and the last two were pushing slowly off the shoreline. Stoick ran for it, wading through the surf and grasping the hands of Lars Thorston. The warrior who had ordered his crew to wait five more seconds for their chief.

As they pushed away, Stoick turned back to the beach. Loki's child was rising to its feet. The night fury was hanging in the air fifty meters away, waiting patiently for it to rise and answer the challenge.

"Sir." The Thorston captain managed to choke the word out. He pointed at the night fury, and Stoick followed his gaze. Despite the distance they were putting between themselves and the island, and the more the better, he could see a figure crouched on top of the night fury.

There was a figure on top of the night fury! Whomever he was, he had

tamed the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. —

"What kind of man rides a dragon?" Lars asked.

The behemoth had stretched out its full length across the beach, from spear-length fangs to the house-sized bulb on the end of its tail. If Stoick laid his entire fleet of longships out end to end, he could not have matched it. The giant stared up at the night fury and let out a challenging roar of bestial hatred. The night fury answered with a roar of its own. At the point where the night fury's blast had struck the giant's flank, its thick grey skin was blackened and puckered. Blood seeped out, dribbling down onto the pebbles and forming puddles deep enough to swallow a man's foot.

Stoick understood: The beast could bleed, but no mere mortal man could strike a killing blow. He eyed the tiny, mysterious stranger and said, "Men don't. We've sailed into the realm of gods and monsters. Take us back to Berk."

Lars turned to his crew and began shouting orders. An enormous cone of fire erupted from the titanic dragon's maw, and filled the air around the nest. And there was rider and night fury, dancing on the edges of the blossoming flames. Tantalizingly close, yet always just a few yards out of danger. At every available opportunity, it would answer the monster's fire with a blast of its own, making the giant flinch and stumble. The last glimpse Stoick saw before the sea stacks obscured his view was of the night fury teasing and dancing out of reach, and of the Behemoth unfolding a tremendous pair of tattered wings.

* * *

><p>Astrid watched from high above as the monstrous leviathan took off into the sky, its massive wings blasting layers of sand, and pebbles right off the beach. It seemed an impossibility that a beast that massive could get into the sky, yet rising it was, pumping itself further into the air with each powerful wingbeat, and giving chase to the tiny black figure atop the night fury.</p>

Directly below her, Astrid could see Berk's fleet, winding their way ship by ship out of the sea stacks and towards the open sea. The swarm of metal-stealing pests had dissipated, likely fled when the rest of the nest took off. Berk would see itself safely home. The only issue was buying them the time to get away from this indomitable monster and its deadly spouts of fire.

When it rose into the air, Astrid had expected Hiccup to flee. To fly for the safety of the sea stacks and let it chase him, but he didn't. The leviathan poured more fire into the sky, and there was Hiccup and his night fury, winding easily around the gigantic coils and tongues of flame. They were teasing it, goading the creature, passing just beyond the reach of its flames and gnashing jaws, yet always coming back, brushing it with a tail, or clawing at its eyes.

She realized he was keeping it occupied. Buying time for Berk's fleet to make it to safety.

The behemoth paused in its assault to take a breath, and she watched in shock as man and night fury rushed headlong towards the beast's gaping maw. The leviathan saw the move, and stretched its neck out,

snapping its jaws shut- on empty air!

Astrid felt a thrill as she realized boy and dragon had parted. Hiccup was running along the monster's back while his dragon flew neatly underneath the behemoth's clamped jaws and slipped between its front legs, spinning to claw it its belly.

Hiccup leapt off the beast's back and out into the open air, just as Astrid had the day she had learned to trust Stormfly, and like Stormfly, the night fury rose to meet him. The rejoined and drifted lazily towards the mountain, easily dodging a swipe by the creature's bulbous tail. Hiccup stood in his stirrups and turned back to watch the results of his incredible stunt, just as she was doing from her safe vantage point in the skies above.

The leviathan had attempted to match its opponents' agility, and that was its mistake. Instead of trusting in its armored hide, it had grown angry enough to follow wherever its tormenters chose to go. After failing to crush the night fury in its jaws, it had attempted to turn backwards and bite the human running across its back. The three combatants had risen nearly a hundred and fifty meters above sea level at that point. In a twisted parody of the night fury's incredible agility, the slow, cantankerous leviathan, already committed to catching the human running across its back, tried to spin head over tail in mid-air to catch its prey. While its wings could lift it and keep it airborne for long, slow glides, or gentle banking from side to side, they certainly couldn't keep the cumbersome creature airborne through such a maneuver.

It let out a panicked bellow, eyes bulging comically as it crashed back down onto the beach, shaking the island. Further from shore, a couple of sea stacks collapsed and a wave rocked Berk's fleet, throwing once ship against a nearby rock face. Astrid desperately wanted to dive down and report the news. She wanted to reassure Stoick, to tell him his son had returned from the dead, to tell him that the monster which had threatened to finish them for good was now lying in a whining, crumpled heap at the base of the black spire, but she couldn't. The moment they spotted a Nadder within shooting range, Astrid and Stormfly would both be peppered with arrows. No, this required a softer, more delicate touch. There was nothing she could do right now. She needed Fishlegs.

On the beach, the leviathan was uncoiling. The night fury circled from a safe distance, screeching and flitting from side to side, teasing the giant monster. The behemoth let out an answering call of its own, yet it limped -limped!- back towards its cave, letting out rumbling, painful grunts. The night fury waited until its bulbous tail had dragged a long trough up the beach, over the piled stones, and vanished into the darkness before they finally gave up the chase. The duo drifted off towards the sea stacks, not following Berk's fleet directly, but rather drifting into an open area, likely for some fresh air and a more relaxed flight after the battle.

With rising shame, she realized she could have helped them. She and Stormfly had sat and watched through the entire engagement as Hiccup handled the actual fighting. Yet there were several reasons for the hesitation. The first, of course, was her shock at seeing the Viking alive.

It was one thing to wander out to Raven Point on a foggy, dew-filled

morning to find an ancient rotting shield, an old fire pit, and some leather saddles. It was one thing to read those descriptions in Hiccup's old journal. As vivid as the events he painted were, there was a world of difference between understanding intellectually what he had done, and seeing it in practice.

After eight years believing he was dead, watching Hiccup, shift and move in the saddle, rise and fall, steady himself and glide with his dragon, watching everything she had learned about him confirmed in one exhilarating athletic display, seeing him alive, and riding a _night furyâ€|_it was enough to stop her in her tracks.

Astrid was overwhelmed with her own emotions. Happiness at finding him alive, anger at his absence, gratitude for his timely reappearance, and sympathy for the plight he had found himself in so long ago. She felt particularly dazzled by the display of arial finesse.

Riding Stormfly was an exhilarating experience, and Astrid had been so proud of herself merely for overcoming her own prejudices and mounting the dragon in the first place, but she was limited in what she could do with the Nadder. They could glide in straight lines easily, and she could handle gentle banks from side to side, but she had yet to grow used to the swooping sensation which occurred whenever Stormfly descended, and when the Nadder beat her wings, or dove towards the sea at any speed, it was all Astrid could do just to stop herself from falling off.

Hiccup and his dragon had moved differently in the air. Watching Hiccup's dives, flips, rolls, and pinpoint turns; watching the way he and his dragon rode the air currents, and drifted easily over and round the fire and turbulence of the larger dragon, put her modest skills to shame. They could read the air together. Astrid could ride a dragon, Hiccup flew with his.

She realized she had lost sight of him in the shadows of the sea stacks, and she pushed Stormfly's spines upwards, pointing the Nadder down towards the sea. They swooped down low, towards the ocean, searching the shadows for any sign of the night fury and his wayward rider.

Stormfly sniffed, and turned her eyes upwards. Astrid followed her dragon's attentions, and spotted the black shape some distance ahead of them, and rising rapidly into the clouds. He was heading in Berk's general direction, though giving the Berk fleet, which had made it through the mist and into open water, a wide berth.

Stormfly's attention was focused on the tiny black speck which floated higher and higher, catching some invisible breeze. Astrid felt thankful that her new friend was a tracking dragon. "Let's follow him, girl!"

* * *

><p>They had run a headcount across the fleet. Astrid Hofferson was the only casualty. Weapons and hardware, including the catapults they left behind, were missing, and they were all shaken by the experience, but Berk's fleet had reached the nest and come back almost completely intact. The only thing which stunned everyone more than this startling revelation was just how easily things all could

have turned out differently.<p>

The story of the night fury rider had spread across the fleet. Those not keeping a lookout for the monster were engaged in wild, rampant speculation about the nature of the mysterious being who had tamed the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Some said the rider was a demi-god of some kind. Some said it was a demon. Still more thought it was the ghost of one of Berk's ancestors, arisen to help them in their time of need. What confused them most was the fact that the stranger had clearly made the choice to save their lives. It was a sign from the gods, for sure, but what sort of sign? After all, if the Gods truly favored them, they wouldn't have forced them into battle with that horrible beast.

The behemoth which had crawled out from under the mountain was the subject of its own discussion. Was it even a dragon, or something worse? After all, dragons didn't run from other dragons, right? Dragons did not normally grow that large, either, and a beast like that had never been mentioned anywhere in Berk's books.

Despite the fact they had sailed out with all limbs intact, this did not feel like a victory. In fact the warriors of Berk's fleet felt less sure than ever before about their place in the world. The horrible, frightening reality of their precarious situation had lumbered out of the mountain and damned near burnt them all to ashes.

Even the most foolish of them realized that attacking the nest was not an option anymore. Now that they knew what horrors dwelt within it, it was likely there would never be another expedition. But what options did that leave them? The dragons would no doubt continue to hound them, but now even the faintest hope of defeating them had faded, leaving a desperate hollowness in their souls.

A watch had been kept on the skies behind them. The bellows and roars of the leviathan could be heard for some time, and the fog flashed with light as the two creatures did battle. The Hooligan warriors did not actually relax until almost half an hour after Helheim's Gate slid under the horizon. They had caught a steady wind, which was carrying them home, but none of them had any idea what on earth they would say upon reuniting with their no doubt joyful families.

Even if they had escaped this battle, Berk had lost the war.

* * *

><p>Astrid swore quietly to herself; she had lost him again! The sky had filled with fluffy pink clouds, and the wind whistled gently past, tugging her hair loose from its braid. She pulled down on Stomfly's spiny frill and leaned backwards, drawing them both to a halt. They were high above the ocean now. Berk was in sight, but by dragonflight it looked to be another ten minutes away. They had long since left the fleet behind. Even at his slowest pace, the night fury was hell to keep up with<p>

She searched the empty sky for that telltale black silhouette, but couldn't find it. He had been right in front of her! A fair distance ahead, it was true, but still, right in front. She had felt a fair amount of disappointment, when he didn't immediately seek her out. He had seen her riding, after all. She could only guess at the number of

questions he had for her; matched only by the thorough grilling she intended to give him.

Where had he been? Why did he go? Why did he come back? When had he learned to fly like that? Astrid wanted a closer look at hisâ€œ everything, actually. His night fury, his strange leather armor which she barely had a chance to glimpse up close, his helmet, his weapons and belongings, if he had them. Not to mention Hiccup himself. It was difficult to judge while there was so much going on, but she was pretty sure he had grown taller. She had seen his sharp green eyes widen beneath his helmet, and she wondered what he looked like underneath. What had changed? What had stayed the same? Why had he come back? She kept replaying that vital moment, that first sight of him, standing in his saddle, leaning back against the wind, guiding his night fury down into the deadly battle, with one hand free so he could turn back to look at her. She was searching the moment repeatedly for any clues it could offer her about him, and she was taken aback by his apparent lack of interest in her.

Astrid heard a dragon call from somewhere behind them. Stormfly reacted before she did, and turned them both, forcing Astrid to hang on for dear life. A black dart vanished behind a cloud. Astrid didn't even have to ask; Stormfly darted after it immediately, chittering in annoyance.

They reached the spot and once again, could find nothing but clear skies.

A cry rang out below them, and the night fury slipped underneath another cloud. Stormfly made to follow, but this time Astrid pulled her up, and directed her over top of the cloud, trying to intercept Hiccup on the other side, yet when they arrived there, the sky was once again empty.

They were playing with her, she realized, testing her abilities the way an opponent would before a sparring session, or a partner would before a dance.

Another call, this time from above, and the night fury's shadow blocked the sunlight for a moment, and passed above the clouds in a rising line. It let out another roar as it sped up slightly.

Astrid glared up at it, and then grinned. "He wants to play games, girl. Let's beat him! Up! Up!"

The Nadder obeyed, taking both of them up through the clouds on an intercept course with the night fury, whipping back and forth around cloud formations. Ahead of them, the Night fury vanished once again into a cluster of feathery white clouds.

"Stop!" Astrid hissed, pulling on the Nadder's spines as she usually did. Stormfly obeyed and they drifted to a halt, watching the cluster carefully. Astrid had made sure to park them behind their own cloud formation, keeping her Nadder as hidden as she could.

Sure enough, the Night fury appeared out the bottom of the cluster, using the darkness of the ocean waves to keep its black hide from contrasting with the pale blue sky. It passed beneath them and began to rise, preparing to circle around and tease from a different direction.

"Now girl, but quietly!" Stormfly kicked into gear, throwing them into an uncomfortably steep dive, gaining ground on the languid night fury.

"Gotcha!" Astrid cheered as they reached their opponent. Her triumphant enthusiasm was dampened the moment she realized that Hiccup's saddle was empty. Confusion and worry erupted in the pit of her stomach. Had he been wounded in the battle?

At that same moment, she heard a faint leathery flapping noise a few meters from her right ear.

"Hi there!" Hiccup's voice was recognizable, but different. Deeper, and somewhat muffled by his helmet.

Astrid turned, and her jaw went slack.

Hiccup was on his back, legs cross, arms spread. He was gliding lazily through the air on leather wings of his own creation. The thin brown membranes stretched from his ankles to his shoulders and out to his wrists.

"You're Astrid Hofferson, right?" he asked cheerfully.

She nodded numbly, and leaned down to look underneath him. A spiny frill ran the length of his back, keeping him centered and balanced in the air the way a keel would on a boat.

Godsâ€œ! this wasâ€œ! unnatural. Something out of a mushroom-fueled dream.

"What in Midgard are you doing on a dragon?" he asked, green eyes giving her and Stormfly a thorough examination. "I thought you hated them."

"What am Iâ€œ?!" she managed weakly. The night fury had silently taken up position on her other side. The boys were now flying in formation with Stormfly. Astrid swallowed her shock and blurted out, "What do you mean what am I doing on a dragon? What are you doing off a dragon?"

"Are you good at flying?" He asked, his voice care-free and easy.

Astrid stuck out her chin. "Good enough!"

"Excellent." Hiccup craned his neck upwards to look over Stormfly's mouth at Toothless. "I need a pickup, bud."

To Astrid's shock the black dragon tipped a wing and, in mid-flight, rolled right over her head, making her duck. At the same moment, Hiccup reached up to his dragon and grabbed a pair of handles he had built into Toothless' saddle. There was a satisfying clicking noise as the partners joined together. Still hanging upside down, Hiccup crouched against Toothless' back. They began to drift sideways and down towards the ocean. The last words Astrid heard before the night fury fell into an almost vertical dive towards the distant blue waves were: "Are you coming, or what?"

Stormfly chirped eagerly, watching their rapid descent. She tilted her head and gave Astrid a pleading look. She could hear Hiccup's exuberant whooping echo across the ocean.

The boys levelled out just as they reached the water. The Night fury's tail slapped the surface as they shot forwards.

"If I fall, you catch me." Astrid ordered. "Understand, girl? I don't want to-Ahhhhhhh!"

Stormfly followed the night fury, tucking in her wings and putting woman and dragon into freefall. "Stormfly! Stormfly!" Astrid's grip began to slip, and she felt herself floating free of her dragon.
"STORMFLY!"

The Nadder tilted her head slightly, noticed what was happening to her rider, and opened her wings just enough to slow herself down a little and let Astrid catch up. Fighting against her fear and nausea, Astrid leaned forward and grabbed the Nadder's wing joints; it was the only place to grip.

Ahead of her, through watering eyes, she could see the night fury and its rider weaving back and forth through the ocean waves, right into a pod of thunderdrums, one of which broke the surface. Without slowing down, man and dragon curled up and rolled, passing underneath its wing as it reached the apex of its breach. Roaring, it slammed into the water behind them, throwing up a cloud of sea foam.

She pulled Stormfly out of their dive, and they drifted lower at a much shallower incline, catching up with Hiccup, but still several hundred meters behind him. Then it was up, up, up. Both dragons beat their wings as Toothless led them soaring back into the clouds, ducking, spinning, and weaving through the clusters, passing close enough to reach out and touch each feathery formation.

Astrid and Stormfly followed, keeping pace as best they could. She even tried to get ahead of Hiccup, using different loops and passing straight through the pleasant damp clouds in order to gain ground while he dilly-dallied around their edges, but she and Stormfly were outmatched in speed, experience and equipment. It rapidly became obvious just how much more one could do with a saddle. Tighter turns and faster movement. Astrid resolved to make herself one, somehow.

There was a boundless joy to their movements as they chased each other through the clouds, whooping and hollering and laughing and chasing one another. Flirting with danger was a large element; after all, they were in a place man was not supposed to be. Astrid loved the adrenaline rushes which accompanied tight banks and steep dives.

More than that, she found herself enamored by the way Berk, and the ocean looked from that height, like a painting. A world as far from her as the moon. She felt entirely free. Free of the politics and the raids and the dreariness and the danger. The sky was a different world entirely. A boundless one, and she realized that all of this which was just starting to dawn on her, Hiccup had already realized. He had been living this way, this free, for eight years. This was his kingdom.

No wonder he had taken the dragon and fled. No man could give up this feeling. Not for anything in the other world of the tiny village on that distant island.

* * *

><p>They landed in the Cove, circling around the far side of Berk first, to prevent anyone from seeing them. With barely a whisper, the night fury landed on a section of soft green grass. The springy youth dismounted immediately, and began to undo the myriad straps which held the saddle on.</p>

Astrid landed a few meters away and patted Stormfly on the nose. "There's a good girl, Stormfly!" Her dragon chirped a response and settled onto the ground, tired out by the long, adventurous flight. Astrid slipped off of her dragon's back and winced; her shoulders, legs and core were all aching like mad. She still hadn't grown used to the muscles involved in flying. Add to that the stress of everything which had happened at the nest, and she felt exhausted, mind and body.

The night fury had been released from his saddle, and the tailfin assembly as well. For the first time, Astrid could appreciate the dragon's sleek black shape, and the way light played across his beautiful black scales, oily rainbows forming and reforming with every slight move. The beast was purring contentedly, its green eyes shut. Like Stormfly, it too was exhausted.

Hiccup was waiting for her, and as she dismounted she finally got a decent look at him. His armor was made of hardened leather, scratched and well-worn. Buckles and straps of all sizes criss-crossed his chest, serving gods only knew what purpose. He had gained about half a foot on her in height, and though he was still thin and lanky, eight years of riding had given him a lean physique. He said, "I suppose I should introduce myse-"

"Hiccup Haddock."

Hiccup froze. Beneath his mask, his eyes widened. "Ahâ€| "

She waited, glaring at him.

"You already know who I am, then?"

"Yep."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Wellâ€| this complicates things."

"Yes. Yes it does."

"I had this whole amazing reveal planned out and everythingâ€| "

"Too bad." All her frustrations bubbled up at that moment. Astrid marched forward and, without another word, hit him in the stomach as hard as she could, sinking her fist deep into his chest. Hiccup stumbled backwards and sank to his knees before her, hiccupping and groaning and clutching his abdomen.

"I forgot how much I missed the Viking way of doing things." He

wheezed, falling on all fours. After a few frantic breaths, he managed, "Ow! A punch in the stomach means both hello and goodbye in Berkian."

"Have you ever tried not being a smartass?" Astrid inquired tartly.

"Have you ever tried being less aggressive? Sometimes words can solve problems. It's a shocking suggestion, I know," he panted weakly "But give it some thought."

"Shut your mouth, or I'll punch you again!"

"Toothless, a little help, bud?" Behind him, the dragon cracked an eye open, huffed in exasperation, and shifted to face away from them.

"Useless reptile." Hiccup choked bitterly, "Ohhhhâ€œ| I think I'm going to puke."

"Good!" Astrid stalked away, opening and closing her fists

"Ohhhhâ€œ| Godsâ€œ| why would you do that?"

"I felt like it."

"'Listen to your heart' is great advice for romantic sops, not violent sociopaths."

"It's been eight years!" she snarled, "Eight years! We've been fighting and dying, and losing more and more to the raids every season. Eight years you had the answer and did nothing! Everyone thinks you're dead, and you just wander back into our lives like it's no big deal? Just last week I watched Sigerich Hrolfson get burned to death by a Nightmare!"

"I didn't know Sigerich Hrolfson."

"You wouldn't!" Astrid bellowed angrily, "He was only seven years old! I don't know where in the fucking world you were, but time didn't pause here on Berk! We're not even the next generation anymore. Fishlegs has a kid, Gobber retired, and I'm teaching in the kill ring. Life went on. People have died, idiot. Whatever your plan was, you don't get to just wander back and save us all! Not without getting punched!"

Hiccup was on his knees, hunched over slightly with his arms wrapped loosely around his torso. He stared up at her. "Gobber retired?"

"From teaching. One of his students died, so he quit. He's still the town's blacksmith."

Hiccup hung his head. "Alright. I understand. I'm sorry."

"Thank you." She replied, breathing hard.

"May I get up now?"

"So long as you keep your mouth shut."

He struggled to his feet, and let out a final huff.

She crossed her arms. "Take your helmet off. I'm tired of talking to a mask!"

"Oh," He slapped his helmet's forehead with a clang, "Right!"

It took a breathless second for him to reach up and swipe the helmet from his head, running a hand through his hair as he did so. Despite her annoyance, when he looked up and smiled at her something foreign and uncomfortable did a summersault in her lower regions. She took a few seconds to absorb the sight before her, trying to sort what she remembered of him from what she had expected, and compare it to reality.

What before had been an overgrown mop had transformed into a feathered auburn mane which hung smartly over dark brows and sharp green eyes. The freckles which had infested his face in youth had all but faded. The baby fat was gone as well, leaving an angular chin, lightly dusted with five o'clock shadow. There was a cut on his cheek. A thin white scar made by sword, or spear perhaps. The wry smile had stayed, though it was tempered and accented by adult experience.

All in all, it wasâ€¦

He wasâ€¦

Astrid stared, shocked by the difference. "Hiccup Haddock?"

"Thought you said you already figured that one out." The wry grin was back again and- oh. That was good. Or maybe not. Astrid couldn't tell, but it was doing strange things to her insides. Where the hell had the snide, awkward fishbone gone?

"_Hiccup _Haddock?"

"That's right!" He gave her a thumbs up.

"Hiccup _Haddock?_"

"Ooohkay." He gave her a careful examination with those brilliant green eyes. "I'm going to be over there." He pointed with both hands towards the pool at the centre of the cove. "When you can remember words that _aren't _my name, let me know." With that declaration, he ambled over to the pool, scooped up a flat stone, and skipped it across the water.

"_Hiccup Haddock?_"

He stayed quiet, skipping stones with one hand, and rubbing his sore stomach with the other. She circled, coming to rest on the shoreline a few meters away. He was frowning, deep in thought.

She picked up a stone and flicked it at his head.

"Ow!" he turned and glared at her, rubbing the tender spot behind his ear.

"What was your plan?" she asked.

"My plan? My plan was to come back to Berk, hang around quietly until I could figure out what was going on, and thenâ€œ make a plan."

"Nothing past that?" she pointed at the dozing night fury. "Where does Toothless fit in?"

"I don't know yet. I'm going to make things better. I'm just not sure how to go about it."

"We could start by killing that thing at the nest."

"The alpha." He nodded.

"Yeahâ€œ wait!" Astrid turned on him furiously, "You knew about it?"

"It called Toothless back to the nest the day we left." Hiccup said. "I saw it there. It lives in the volcano itself. The dragons bring in food to feed it."

"Like a beehive? They're the workers, and it's the queen?"

"Sort of."

"And you knew. And you didn't tell us. You just took off?"

Hiccup took a step back. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Oh, Gee, I don't knowâ€œ go find your dad and tell him?"

"No!" he shot back, "You guys would have killed Toothless!"

"You discovered the dragon's nest!" Astrid spluttered, dumbfounded, "The thing we've been hunting for since Vikings first sailed here, and you just _ran_? You just kept it a secret? To protect your pet dragon? Are you serious?"

"Yes." He replied bluntly. He turned back to the pool.

Astrid stared at him in shock. She turned away. Toothless and Stormfly were both curled up on the grass. She would have thought they were fast asleep, but Toothless' ear flaps were pointed straight up in the air, twitching with every sound. He looked like a giant kitten. Stormfly was furled in a tight ball with her nose pressed up against her bottom. Both of them seemed completely at ease. They trusted their riders implicitly.

She recalled the moment on that forgotten spit of sand, when she had the opportunity to slit Stormfly's throat, and she hadn't. She remembered just a few hours ago when she had refused to tell Stoick his son was alive, because it meant revealing Stormfly, and she knew what would happen. Hiccup's snide comments echoed in her ears: _I forgot how much I missed the Viking way of doing things. A punch in the stomach means both hello and goodbye in Berkian. _He really did see them as barbarians. Simple problems, simple solutions. Simple people. Brute force ruled the day. There was no subtlety, no room for third options. The war was an 'Us or Them' affair, and even if Hiccup

had flown back with every good intention of helping them, it would mean his dragon's death, and quite possibly him being declared a clanless outcast. They certainly wouldn't _listen _to him.

Befriend dragonsâ€œ|The true solution to Berk's problem had been right there. Not just in front of him, but in front of all of them as well, and he was the only one who had seen it. The rest of Berk had flatly refused to, and they would have reviled and exiled anyone who suggested it. The grave the Hooligan tribe lay in was, at least in part, one they had dug themselves.

"Fine." She said. "I get it. But if you want to help now, you'll need a plan."

"I'm not going to rush into anything." He replied seriously. "I need to know what's going on."

"You'll need to talk to Fishlegs."

* * *

><p>Whew. This one was a looooong time coming. Hope you all are enjoying.

Oh, and I was wondering: Should I put a proper cover image in place instead of my little Commander Keen icon, or should I just leave it be? I can't draw for crap, but there's a lot of good artists out there, and a ton of screenshots. What do you guys think?

For the Fallout fans, yes, Mutatis Mutandis is still going. Slowly but surely.

Finally, Midoriko-sama has updated her story several times since I last mentioned it. Please go give it a read.

27. Chapter 27

Prodigal Son 27

Fishlegs stared down at the page. Poetry tumbled down the rough paper, only to end halfway through a line. Several stanzas of his victory poem were already written, but he was woefully unhappy with the poem. He had set out to present his chief with an Edda by which to remember their victory over the dragons. Somewhere along the line, the path his muse had laid out faded like a forest trail at dusk, leaving him stranded in strange territory with no way forward.

_ "The ruler of Berk chose Astrid the Valiant;_

_ Whose courage is known when dragons flee;_

_ For in the tumult of battle he needs trusted fighters:_

_ conquest follows a king who may count on his warriors._

_ "Hold firm your hilts, ye blessed fighters,_

_ shield flung on shoulder, to show ye are men;_

breast 'gainst breast offer we to our foes:
beak against beak, so shall battle the eagles.
Foremost among fighters, bold Stoick the Vast fares,
_glorying in swordplay, in horn'd-helm dorn'd;
after him marching the martial hosts of Berk,
with ring-laid helms and rattling spears.
Flee ye demons, to Hel's hearth with thee;
_Stoick Haddock and his fearless host shall crush the
enemy;_
Follow Valiant Astrid, set foot on fatal shore.

The last bit was giving him some trouble.

Fishlegs believed in the power of words. As a child he had listened to stories of great Viking kings and heroes, boasts of conquests and wars, of valiant deaths and evil destroyed. Whereas his friends and brothers had eaten it all up with shining eyes and eager hearts, a curious question had struck Fishlegs. One which had redefined how he looked at his own culture:

Who, exactly, had written these stories? History very much belonged to the victor, and words had the power to shape it both before in the form of speeches to inspire and terrify, and afterwards in tales to remember and learn from. Stories, when told to the young, had the power to shape the worldviews of entire generations, and through them to their children. It was a form of social control.

Of course every Viking knew dragons were evil, and that the greatest of Berk's heroes had conquered them, driven them off, or defeated them. Berkians believed that to this very day, despite the fact that the beasts still harried them on a monthly basis. It struck Fishlegs that those who suffered defeated were never given the opportunity to tell their side of the story.

Words held strange powers over people. Any ruler intent on keeping his throne and benefitting his kingdom, had better understand that power. Astrid did not. Neither did the Jorgensons, but there was no man on Berk who could match Fishlegs' poetry. He was greatly respected for it. Every House on Berk had commissioned a poem or two from him. He read regularly at weddings and funerals. While those honest words had earned him a living, allowed him to put meat and bread on the table for his wife and beloved daughter, the poem he was writing now was an entirely different exercise, with an entirely different purpose. One he felt he was born for: Helping Berk.

Astrid's influence would be much stronger if she came back with an Edda prepared, boasting of her triumphs, and offering homage to the power of the Haddock line instead of the Jorgensons. It was one of the reasons he stayed behind when the call went out for the raid, and his narrative skills were the reason no one questioned him. Every man on Berk was a warrior, but very few were good poets. It was something

to be valued, and kept from danger. Besides, everyone knew his wife Ruffnut was the better fighter anyway.

Unlike Hiccup, Fishlegs had proven himself on the battlefield. With club in hand he had defended Berk, and contributed to the island's defense, yet he was not the best fighter, and he perfectly comfortable with his place near the bottom of the list. He had other skills to rely upon. Subtler ones.

His skills were failing him now. Fishlegs was horribly aware of the power of words, the power of lies. He understood the veil those simple childhood stories had drawn over Berk's eyes. This story of conquest Astrid required was not one he wanted to tell. Berk already had so many stories about mighty warriors slaying dragons. Yet Astrid's true bravery, her true brilliance in following Hiccup's footsteps was the far more interesting tale. The one that deserved to be told. Perhaps it would in due course, yet for now, another inspiring account of blade piercing hideâ€!

Fishlegs hall echoed as someone pounded on the door.

"Coming." Fishlegs slid his chair back, holding it carefully so that he didn't knock it over, as so often happened; he had inherited his father's husky frame, and it sometimes took him by surprise. Particularly when he was so wrapped up in his own head. Ruffnut found it cute. Fishlegs found it irritating.

He opened the door a crack, and found it being pushed out of his grasp. A hooded figure stepped inside and closed it quickly. He balled up a fist, just to be cautious, but then the hood was lowered to reveal Astrid. Her face was pale and worried, yet her eyes shined with excitement of a sort he had never seen on her before.

"The fleet back already?" Fishlegs asked, smiling at her, "You must have been at the nest all of five minutes."

"He's back." She announced breathlessly.

Fishlegs' brow furrowed. "Stoick?"

"Not Stoick, you idiot! Hiccup! Hiccup Haddock is back!"

Fishlegs' mind ignited. Like a tapestry, the future crystallized before him with threads of possibilities winding through each other, each leading to a different vision of the future. What would Stoick's reaction be? What did this mean for the Jorgensons? Hiccup would fit right into the progressive movement, but would his name and face wield enough power to shift the balance?

"I hadn't anticipated thisâ€| "

"No kidding."

"Is his night fury with him?"

Astrid nodded silently.

"Does Stoick know?"

"I doubt it."

He turned away and began to rustle through his home, pulling out a satchel and filling it with a variety of items including food, quills, ink, and paper. While he worked, Astrid gave him a quick run-down of the journey to the nest, the great beast within.

"There's no way a spear or sword will hurt that thing, Fishlegs. It's too big. We're going to need a new plan."

"Perhaps." Fishlegs agreed tentatively.

Astrid moved on to the tale of Hiccup's timely rescue. "He just swooped out of the clouds and saved us. You should have seen it! He flew circles around the monster! And he can fly, Fishlegs. He made his own wings I saw it! And his night fury—"

"Yes, yes. I'm sure it's very impressive." Fishlegs said shortly.

Astrid fell silent. She planted her hands on her hips, and her eyes narrowed.

Fishlegs sighed, stuffing a loaf of bread into his satchel. "That Hiccup Haddock invented an interesting device is not the slightest bit surprising, Astrid." He paused, giving her declaration a more thorough examination. "Though he may have outdone himself this time. I'm more interested in why he chose to come back, and what his intentions are towards Berk."

"He wanted to know what was going on." Astrid looked worried. "Fishlegs, I stole that sketch, and I gave my shield to Stoick. Hiccup is going to figure out pretty quickly that we lied. If he comes forward—"

"I'm sure it'll be fine." Fishlegs said, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Everything could fall apart. All he has to do is tell the village—"

"Hiccup's a smart man, he never liked Snotlout, and let's not forget that the sketch in question was of you." Fishlegs smiled. "The game is far from ended."

Astrid did not look at all reassured.

* * *

><p>They set off for the Cove separately. Astrid had snuck into Berk, and as such, needed to take the time and effort to sneak out again. Fishlegs, on the other hand, walked freely over to the docks, greeted the fishermen, retrieved two baskets of arctic cod, and set off into the woods.</p>

As he traveled through the dense, foggy forest, he tried to keep his mind clear of assumptions. Eight years was a long time, and Hiccup Haddock could have changed in any number of ways. Though Fishlegs could theorize about the various ways the Heir's return could impact his plans for Berk, to make presumptions about Hiccup's behavior

could be a costly mistake, starting with the assumption that Hiccup was there to stay.

Hiccup wasn't the first Viking ever to leave the Archipelago. King Oswald the Agreeable had led a small berserker fleet south to join the Rus; Viking traders in a distant land. He had come back with a fleet ten times the size of the next largest in the Archipelago, along with wealth and arms to match.

Trader Johann brought back stories of Vikings further south joining battle with kings and armies of vast size. Those far off places seemed another world entirely to the tiny, embattled island of Berk. The tales kept them warm during cold nights, and distracted children during the worst of the raids.

Yet Hiccup had actually experienced that other world, and after eight years absence, a spontaneous decision to come back was unlikely. Hiccup had been motivated by something. The wayward heir had his own reasons for returning, and until Fishlegs knew what those were, he decided he would have to tread carefully, and not make any assumptions.

The Cove was not deserted when he arrived. Stormfly was there. The Nadder was dozing, but perked up as he appeared, and tromped over to sniff at the baskets of cod. Fishlegs dumped one out for the dragon and sidled further into the cove, letting the nadder gorge itself. The stone-edged clearing was empty, save for the nadder. Fishlegs turned his attention to the black pines which rimmed the cove. The shadowy trees were silhouetted against the clouded grey sky.

"Hiccup?" he called out. His voice sounded lonesome and frail, echoing across the hollow. He set down the second basket, and wondered if the man had simply taken off again. "It's Fishlegs. Astrid said you'd be here. I brought some fish for your dragon. I just want to talk."

He heard a leathery noise behind him, and a reptilian hiss. Fishlegs turned, and found himself face to face with short, sharp fangs, smooth ink-black scales, and narrow, intelligent green eyes. The night fury circled him in a quiet, cat-like manner, looking every bit the nightmarish, unholy demon which the book of dragons had expressed. Hiccup's sketch, while technically accurate, had failed to capture the creature's predatory mannerisms, or the coldness in its eyes. He wished desperately that he had thought to bring a shield.

"Fishlegs." Hiccup Haddock was seated on a nearby boulder, watching them with the same cautious intelligence his dragon displayed. He was wearing a strange brown leather suit with black armour padding his chest, back and shoulders. A black eagle crest adorned his right pauldron.

Hiccup had very much grown into himself, with sharp, angular features, a messy mane of auburn hair, the lightest dusting of a beard, and thick brows, all of it a little more delicate than Stoick's stern face and bushy beard. Fishlegs suspected strongly that Hiccup had taken after his mother, though he couldn't remember what Valka had looked like. No one could anymore, except perhaps for Spitelout, Stoick and Gobber.

Hiccup slid lightly down the boulder and landed near them. As a younger man, Fishlegs remembered staring down at a shrimp of a child, with barely enough meat on him to hold his bones together. Now Hiccup towered over him. He was still skinny by Berk's standards, but his shoulders were broader than before. He had plenty of the lean quality of muscle which daily riding produced. The boy was a man, and he had a physical presence now which had never been there before.

Fishlegs nodded at him, keeping an eye on the dragon, which was still circling them both. "Hello Hiccup."

Hiccup glanced at the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself, and sighed. "Give it a rest, bud."

Immediately, everything about the dragon changed. It sat up on its haunches, wings folded against its flanks. Its eyes, which before had been narrow slits taking a hostile inventory of Fishlegs' very soul, were wide and friendly. The beast's ear flaps, which had been pressed back against its sinuous neck, were standing straight up, and twitching in time with its rider's voice.

Hiccup had wandered over to stroke his dragon's side, whispering a few comforting words in a dialect Fishlegs could not understand. Then he turned and extended a hand. "Good to see you again, Fishlegs."

"And you." they grasped each other's hands and shook, each man using the guise of good manners to give the other a more thorough investigation.

Fishlegs nodded at Toothless, who was peeking curiously over his rider's shoulder. "Soâ€œ! a night fury."

"Yeah." Hiccup gave his dragon a fond look. "He's alright once you get to know him. And you. You have a kid."

Fishlegs thought back to his little bundle of boundless joy, and glanced at the night fury. One day he hoped his daughter would understand the risks he had taken to make a better world for her. "I do. I'm looking forward to watching her grow up."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you."

They fell silent, each unsure how to approach the deeper subject of Berk's future, and Hiccup's return.

"I brought a game of King's Table." Fishlegs suggested. He shook his satchel, "If you still remember how to play."

"It's been a while." Hiccup admitted. The night fury was beginning to nose the basket, and Fishlegs pushed it over with a cautious kick, spilling fish out onto the ground. The dragon dove in immediately, paying the humans no further attention.

Hiccup moved aside, gesturing over to the rotting table he had built eight years before. It occurred to Fishlegs as he stepped forwards

that the young man had yet to turn his back on him. Caution? Likely. Or perhaps, once again, politesse hid another agenda. Either way, trust was far ahead on the horizon. Not entirely comfortable with this, Fishlegs slowed his pace until they were walking in step, side by side. He eyed Hiccup's shoulder pad, and the strange symbol emblazoned upon it. "A black eagle?"

"The flag I fought under."

"You're a warrior?"

"Not when I can help it."

"Whose flag is it?"

"Byzantium's."

"Were they worth fighting for?"

A long, thoughtful pause followed as they each pulled a rotting log up to the table and took a seat. "No."

The logs were not very long either, being chosen as the perfect height for a fourteen year old boy. Now Hiccup's knees were around his ears. Fishlegs was not doing all that much better. His size was making balancing an issue, but they both smiled politely at each other and said nothing.

As he set the board, Fishlegs parsed hiccup's statement. "So is Byzantium a kingdom like Berk?"

Hiccup chuckled. "The city of Byzantium alone I think covers more ground than this entire island. It's a big place. And it's just the capital city of an enormous kingdom."

"Ah." Fishlegs set the last few playing pieces on the board with deliberate clicks. "With so much land and so many people at his disposal, this Emperor must have been a very wealthy man. And a very powerful one."

"I suppose. But nothing changes. It's like Tribal politics, but on a much larger scale. When two empires go to war, fleets stretch to the horizon and hundreds upon hundreds die in every battle." Hiccup shook his head. "It's so very productive."

There was sarcasm at least. That had stayed the same. Fishlegs noted the scar on the man's cheek. "And you fought in these battles?"

"A few of them."

"Sounds horrific."

"I'd rather think of it as a learning opportunity."

"And what did you learn?"

"That I hate fighting." Hiccup gestured at the board. "King's Men, or Attackers?"

Fishlegs gave the board a look. He had played King's Table all his

life. His father had taught him early on. The square board was thirteen spaces a side. The King's men were arranged in a diamond pattern at the center of the board, with the King's Stone at the very center. The attacking stones were more numerous, and arranged around the outside of the board. The objective of the King's Men was to get the King's Stone to any corner of the board. The objective of the attackers was to capture the stone.

Common sense dictated that the Attackers held all the cards, yet in Fishlegs' experience the King's Men usually won the match. He decided to play as the attacking forces, giving Hiccup a chance to defend, though the tables could turn at any moment, and they would have to, if Hiccup wanted to win.

"You go first." Fishlegs suggested.

"Sure." Hiccup slid a piece across the board, testing Fishlegs. "How is Berk doing?"

Fishlegs countered with a move of his own. "We've managed."

"It's been a long time, but the first thing I see when I get back is Astrid Hofferson riding that nadder over there. Clearly something interesting happened." Hiccup moved up another piece, forcing Fishlegs to flee back to his lines. He responded with another cautious advance on another section of the board. Once again, Hiccup drove him back "You've spoken to Astrid?"

"All she said was that I should talk to you. But so far, that hasn't proven very helpful."

They maneuvered in silence, each trying to simultaneously flank the opposing pieces and protect their own. Very soon the board was covered in scattered black and white pieces, mingling as armies would. Battle had been joined.

"I can guess a few things, though." Hiccup said as he and Fishlegs moved and countered. "For whatever reason, you and Astrid figured out the truth about Dragons. But Berk hasn't. Berk doesn't know that Astrid is hiding a dragon, and like a bunch of whooping, hollering idiots, they attacked the Nest without doing any reconnaissance. That means my dad's still in charge, and Snotlout's probably next in line. The Jorgensons have a stranglehold." With a few clicks, he scooped up three of Fishlegs' pieces, the first captures of the game. He looked up and smiled. "How am I doing?"

"A good start." Fishlegs congratulated, smiling inwardly; he had anticipated the captures, and planned for them. The move put Hiccup's King in jeopardy. He moved his own pieces turn by turn, forcing several of Hiccup's other pieces to back off. "But I don't know what you planned to accomplish here. Berk still hates dragons. If you were planning to merely swoop out of the sky, pull your helmet off and declare us all freed, your flapping tongue would likely meet the blade of an axe before your words reached people's ears."

"Fishlegs!" Hiccup shook his head, disappointed yet amused. "One of the advantages of coming in from the outside world is the sense of perspective it can give you. I can see the whole board, and I was planning a subtler approach."

One of Hiccup's pieces had been lingering in a different section of the board, chased there, in point of fact, by one of Fishlegs' earlier moves. Fishlegs groaned as he realized that in retreating, Hiccup had created a straight path to the center of his opponent's embattled formations. An opening the young man took full advantage of. He swept in, and removed three more of Fishlegs' pieces. Of more concern was the sudden gap in Fishlegs' line. A gap a smart player would take full advantage of.

Driven to full retreat, Fishlegs pulled his troops back and tried to salvage a defensible line. All the while, Hiccup harried him, forcing dodging movements upon him, and disrupting his retreat. He only managed to escape by sacrificing another two pieces, putting Hiccup's advance forces on the defensive, and capturing a few of the King's Men in the process. In the end, he had lost seven pieces, and Hiccup had lost three. A sense of stunned panic gripped him as he realized he might lose the game, but he also felt exhilarated; Fishlegs had not lost a game of King's Table in six years.

All the while, Hiccup had been talking. "There's a great Greek poem called The Odyssey. It's about a King named Odysseus who sails off to war, and doesn't return home for twenty years. He encounters all kinds of monsters along the way, but the most important part is what happens when he gets back. He doesn't march through the front door of his castle and greet his wife and son. His child has all grown up, and his wife has been fighting off suitors who were after his land and money. If any of those men knew he was back, they'd kill him out of hand.

"So Odysseus waits. He disguises himself as a beggar. He makes a few allies on the inside. He figures out who his enemies are, and how many of them he faces. He lays the groundwork for a battle and he picks the right moment to reveal himself. That's what it's about, Fishlegs. The Right Moment. Hiccup Haddock will not return to Berk until Vikings already like Dragons. I need to lay groundwork, and I need to win this battle before it starts."

With these last few words, he captured two more of Fishlegs' beleaguered pieces, and took a corner of the board for his own. They each sat back. Fishlegs was stared down at the board. His face blank. In a few moves, Hiccup's defense would be airtight, and his king would be in a position to take the corner and win the game.

Hiccup was staring across the table at him, wearing a friendly smile, with undertones of worry. He said, "I need allies, Fishlegs. I need people on the inside. People who know the lay of the land, politically. I saved Berk's fleet but right now I'm just a beggar at the door. I want to be King."

Fishlegs looked up at him and met his gaze. "The important question is what kind of King? What would you do differently?"

"Look, I know I've been gone a long time, but Berk is my home. It's our home. The outside world is full of relentless and crazy people who start terrible wars for terrible reasons. But there are also ideas and dreams about who we are, and where we can go, what we can be. The world needs a voice that stands for peace, and it needs warriors willing to fight to keep it. I can't think of more stubborn warriors than Vikings. Even three hundred years of constant war with

dragons hasn't ended us. We may be small in numbers but if we stood this long _against _dragons, then from _dragonback_ we could stand for something greater than anything the rest of the world can pit against us."

From his pocket, he produced an intricate gold disc, inlaid with smaller, spinning discs and inscribed with a foreign language Fishlegs couldn't understand. But he could appreciate the object's beauty.

"That's called an Astrolabe." Hiccup explained. "It tells you the time of day, and the year. It predicts the movements of the stars and the changing of the seasons. It belonged to a friend of mine. Someone who stood for peace. I have the ability to change a part of the world for the better. I promised her that I would, and I intend to follow through on that promise. Will you help me?"

The device sat snugly in Fishlegs' palm. He reached out with a tentative finger and spun the inner disc, watching the symbols flow in and out of one another. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before. He found himself intensely curious about this friend, and where Hiccup had been for the past eight years. He handed it back and stared down at the board, and Hiccup's victory, nearly assured. In a few moves, Berk's Lost Heir would win the game.

Unless he slipped up somehowâ€|

Fishlegs said, "Alright. But if we want to move forward, there's a few things you should know." He moved a piece across the board to trap one of Hiccup's vulnerable pieces. If it succeeded, it would also leave the King vulnerable. He knew a player as shrewd would already have spotted the risk and accounted for it.

"Go ahead." Hiccup drove the attacker off with a piece of his own, shoring up his advancing line in the process

"Snotlout's not the heir. Astrid is." Fishlegs made another move, once again laying siege to Hiccup's line.

Hiccup stared at him, game forgotten. "How in Hel's name did that happen? Is Snotlout dead, or did the village actually make a halfway intelligent choice?"

"It's your move." Fishlegs said. As Hiccup turned his attention to the board, Fishlegs added, "Astrid and I found your notes in the Book of Dragons, and we found your sketches and your journal. But Astrid got caught taking them from your dad's home, so we had to think of an excuse."

"How does one turn from criminal to Heir?"

Hiccup ran his eyes over the board several times, trying to track the progress of the game, and parse the new information at the same time. He eventually made the right move, driving off Fishlegs' attack, and limiting his options ever further. Yet the distraction was noticeable. One more push, and Fishlegs knew he could turn the game around. He reached out and once again moved for the attack, moving a piece into a sacrificial position to open up Hiccup's flank for an enemy waiting across the board. It was a risky move; if Hiccup allowed his own piece to be captured next turn, he could recover and

complete his defensive positioning, making his King invulnerable. Then it would truly be the end of the game.

Fishlegs decided to gamble. He set his piece down and said, "During the trial, Astrid declared her undying love for you."

"What?" Hiccup's head snapped up so fast that Fishlegs heard his neck crack. His eyes were wild with a maelstrom of confusion, amazement and disbelief.

Fishlegs suppressed a smile. "It's your move."

Hiccup was staring at him, pale-faced. "Astrid didn't love me. Astrid didn't know I existed."

"It's your move, Hiccup."

Hiccup grunted in frustration and captured Fishlegs' attacking piece, giving the board only a momentary glance. He looked back up at his opponent. "What do you mean Astrid said she loved me? What does that mean? What happened?"

"It was a lie told at her trial to gain public sympathy." Fishlegs moved his secret plan into action, capturing two of Hiccup's pieces and peeling open his line for further attacks. "Among the things Astrid had stolen from Haddock Hall was a sketch you had made of 'The Most Beautiful Girl in Midgard'."

A glimmer of vague recollection shimmered in Hiccup's dumbstruck gaze. It was his turn, but the game couldn't be further from his mind.

"Your father was ready to exile her when I suggested the possibility. The crowd loved it, so Astrid and I simply let them keep on believing it. A few days later, Stoick bought her as the Bride you would have taken and the Queen Berk should have had. It's your move, by the way."

Hiccup glanced down and did a double-take, realizing what had just happened. His defenses were in shambles, his plan to Crown the Corner of the board obliterated, and his army at very real risk of being destroyed. He looked up and scowled. "So you just used me? You just used my memory like that?"

Fishlegs shrugged. He reached down to the board and began a ruthless assault, routing Hiccup's forces. Hiccup countered as best he could, but there was no doubt he was on the run, and about to suffer heavy losses. Fishlegs said, "Politics is a fickle thing, my friend. I find it plays to emotions and moods and sympathies as much as it does to anything rational. We thought you were dead. Well everyone else did, anyway. Astrid and I knew you had flown away on a dragon. We didn't think you were ever going to come back. It was a convenient tale, and it put Astrid ahead of Snotlout in the running for Chieftainship. That was good for Berk."

"And then I came back." Hiccup was paying far more attention to the board, and despite Fishlegs' best efforts, he was starting to rally. He had lost another four pieces in the routing, and his King Stone was being driven back across the board, but he was gathering his forces quite effectively.

They both heard the nadder begin to chirp excitedly. Astrid was emerging from the Cove's entrance, carrying another basket of fish. Toothless, who had curled up for a snooze near the riverside, tilted up his ear flaps, listening intently, though his eyes were shut. Hiccup had turned in his seat to watch her approach, the game once again forgotten. All of this stopping and starting was grating on the one hand, but as an observer of human behavior and a political advisor intent on setting Berk on the right course, he knew that cataloguing Hiccup's emotional, sore spots, blind areas, and pressure points would pay off in the long run, when such pressures needed to be applied.

After eight years, Hiccup Haddock still carried a torch for Astrid. That was painfully obvious. It could be a very good thing for Berk, particularly if Astrid took the 'Anyone in Midgard or Hel's Realm except Snotlout' approach to choosing a husband. Her choices would be pretty much limited to either one of them anyway. There was no way Berk would accept a third option. Berk's Rightful Heir could take his place, with his rightful Queen at his side. Long Lost Loves reunited. No one could argue the case, signed contract or not. Astrid had wanted power. This was an excellent way to obtain it with the village's blessing and little to no bloodshed.

However the entire thing could backfire if Hiccup didn't first reveal his face to Berk. If the two of them grew close while he kept his identity a secret, he could actually undermine Astrid's power within the village, and force a wedding between her and Snotlout, just to keep the village out of the hands of a dragon-loving foreign stranger. This dance had to be delicately and carefully monitored.

Fishlegs was looking forward to the challenge.

Stormfly had tromped over to her rider, and was nuzzling Astrid's shoulder. The shieldmaiden in turn pulled fish from her basket and tossed them into the air for the nadder to catch, grinning at the resulting display.

Hiccup turned back to Fishlegs, his eyes wide and glazed over. "What do I say to her?"

Fishlegs shrugged.

"We're married, right?"

"No. You're dead, remember? It's a complicated legal situation. If anything, she's likeâ€‘ a sister."

Hiccup turned a very putrid shade of green.

"Your move, Hiccup."

"Ummâ€‘" Hiccup stared down at the board, trying valiantly to put aside his distractions and confusion. He moved another piece into place, rebuilding his defenses, and blocking Fishlegs' flanking maneuver. Fishlegs responded with a move of his own trying to keep up the waning pressure.

"Hey boys." Astrid was striding over, and once again Hiccup's

attention was gone. He leapt to his feet, very nearly knocking over the board. His hand leapt nervously to the back of his neck.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! hi Astrid. How are you doing?"

"Fine." Astrid squinted at him. "You look green. Oh my god, Fishlegs, what did you do to him?"

Hiccup was wringing his hands together animatedly. "So I heard you found the sketch, and I just wanted to apologize-uuumph!"

Astrid had grabbed him by the face and pushed him back down onto his seat. Her gaze flickered between them. She said, "So do we have a plan yet?"

"Not yet." Fishlegs admitted, examining Hiccup's renewed defense. Hiccup was far from losing. His flanks were well covered, and though he was being besieged on all sides a few of the King's Pieces which were scattered around the edges of the board could make very quick work of Fishlegs' surrounding barricade if he gave them but a moment's inattention. Meanwhile Hiccup could sacrifice them turn by turn, rally in the center and strike out once again for a corner. The game was, in fact, turning in his favor, and with Astrid present, Hiccup probably felt he had more to lose if he were defeated.

"Well," Astrid said in a faux pleasant voice, "It's nice to know you two haven't been sitting here wasting all this time playing a board game."

"That might be a little bit unfair." Hiccup suggested mildly.

Astrid kicked the table over, spilling game pieces all over the soft ground. She pulled out her axe, ignoring the boys' protests.
"Stoick's fleet is getting closer by the minute. They can't be more than a day away! What are we going to do?"

Fishlegs crossed his arms and sat back. He felt a mild stab of irritation at Astrid's blatant contempt for their game. It was the closest game he had ever played, and the closest he had come in six years to losing. He made a mental note to challenge the rider again when they had the time. He could tell by the look Hiccup subtly shot him that he wasn't alone in his frustration.

"You'll have to present yourself to Stoick." Astrid told Hiccup.
"You're not just going to fly away again. If you do I will hunt you down and castrate you."

"You're a fantastic motivational speaker, Astrid." The rider said dryly.

Astrid scowled and kicked a clod of dirt at him.

"Ach! Hey!" Hiccup brushed himself off.

"I want to know what your plan is!"

"I can see how kicking dirt at me would help with that."

"Maybe you'd prefer a punch in the face?" she asked sweetly.

"Astrid Hofferson: Born Diplomat."

She raised her axe threateningly.

"Alright, alright!" Hiccup rose to his feet and turned away, pacing back and forth across the wet moss. Astrid and Fishlegs watched expectantly. The dragons watched too. Toothless had been woken up by Astrid's outburst, and now both he and Stormfly were following Hiccup's movements. As the heir talked, he waved his arms animatedly, as if the thoughts themselves were giving him more energy than he could contain. To Fishlegs, who thought best in moments of quiet stillness, and Astrid, a stoic warrior, he looked a little mad.

He said, "I can't just march into the village and take my helmet off. That would mean revealing who I am, and what I've done. It would put Toothless at risk, and solve nothing. I'd be amazed if Berk didn't just run me off the island there and then."

"I dunnoâ€œ|" Astrid began doubtfully, "Things here are pretty bad. And now that you've rescued them—"

"No." Fishlegs interrupted they both turned to him. "Hiccup's right. I know right now it looks like a tall dark stranger swooped in and saved the fleet, but we shouldn't underestimate Berk's hatred towards dragons, and while they might tell stories of the dragon rider, I don't think they'd look as kindly on Hiccup's return. Not when he's already proven himself a coward."

"Standing right here, Fishlegs." Hiccup murmured.

Fishlegs ignored him. "They'd ask difficult questions: why he left, and chose a dragon over his village. He's untested, and what little Berk knows of him is not enough to make them trust him. We have to free them of their preconceptions if we want to reach them."

"Exactly." Hiccup said. "Berk has to be ready to receive dragons, and I have to prove myself capable of leading before I take my helmet off."

"So stay as the mystery rider. At least for a little while." Astrid replied.

"We'll still need leverage to prevent them from just shooting you out of the sky the moment you start to propose change, but we get past that initial reaction, then Astrid and I can publicly support you and your crazy ideas as Berk's best hope. We build on the rescue, instead of your cowardice—"

"Gods, how I'm loving that word."

"—and reintroduce you as a leader before they even know who you are. We take Berk heart by heart and mind by mind. We gain the town's loyalty, and _then _you reveal yourself as a savior and a proven leader. Instead of Hiccup the Useless: the boy who ran away."

"You'll need a name." Astrid added. "Something catchy. Nightblade. Nightrider. Blackwing orâ€|"

"Menacing might not be the best idea." Fishlegs told her. "We don't want the dragon-riding idea to be scary."

"Alright." She shrugged. "Windwalker, Skywalker, Skyriderâ€| Windrider!"

"Too lightly. We need something friendlier. More diplomatic. Indicative of peaceful change."

Astrid rolled her eyes, "Loki's balls, Fishlegs! What about â€|Cat tongue?"

"Prometheus." Hiccup declared, with a certainty in his tone which brooked no argument. The other two fell silent, watching him. Hiccup had spent the last half a minute in complete silence, one hand cupping his chin, the other balled underneath his elbow.

"Pro-what?"

"Prometheus."

"That'sâ€|" Fishlegs frowned. "That's not even Norse! What language is that? What does it mean?"

"Doesn't matter, Fishlegs." Hiccup's arms dropped to his sides, and he strode over to Toothless, who sat up, tail waving cheerfully from side to side. Hiccup unhitched his helmet and held it in his hands, staring down through the eyeholes. "What matters is what it means to me." He slipped his helmet on, his voice slightly muffled, but still intelligible. "I am Prometheus. I saved Berk, and you owe me a blood debt. That's all the leverage I'll need to start this whole thing."

Fishlegs and Astrid exchanged a confused look. Then he shrugged. "Alrightâ€| what's your plan, Prometheus?"

"Wellâ€|" Hiccup sighed and planted his hands on his hips. "Stoick's fleet is a day out, yet. I think I'll give Stoick back his lost warrior. As a token of good faith in future negotiations."

Astrid took a wary step back. "I'm not going to like this part of the plan, am I?"

"Depends," Hiccup's green eyes glinted mischievously, "How well can you swim?"

* * *

><p>This chapter was late due to a number of factors including politics, a job hunt, several parties, and (hopefully) a professional writing opportunity. I'll try to update more regularly.

**Lines from Fishlegs' poem were shamelessly stolen and adapted from actual Norse poetry. I can't write poetry myself. I just don't have the knack. But I can steal it. **

The board game scene between Fishlegs and Hiccup was inspired by a moment in one of the late Sir Terry Pratchett's novels, Thud. Terry Pratchett was one of the best fantasy writers in the history of the genre, right up there with Tolkien in influence and originality. Very different, but equally as important. My favorite fantasy novel ever written is Night Watch, and his works as a whole take up an insane amount of space on my book shelf. When he passed away, I cried.

28. Chapter 28

My apologies for the wait. I took some time off of this to update another one of my stories. I'm going to continue working on both of them, so updates will be a little less frequent. If you're at all interested, the other series is from the videogame Fallout 3.

* * *

><p>Prodigal Son 28

Astrid and Hiccup circled around to approach Stoick's fleet from behind. The most challenging part of their plan was getting Stormfly to stay behind with Fishlegs. It had taken a little convincing, with Hiccup eventually giving the nadder some sweetgrass, and quiet words neither of the other two heard. Stormfly settled right down after that.

The fleet was actually within sight of Berk by the time Hiccup and Toothless were circling overhead. Astrid was seated behind him, gripping the safety wires as tightly as she could.

"I really hate this idea." She told him.

"I would too."

"I mean I hate it!"

"You said you were up for it."

"That was back in the cove." Astrid stared down at the ocean, some four hundred meters below. The weather was fair, but she could still see the occasional whitecap. She knew the waves would be a lot larger once she was struggling to stay above them. The water would be cold, and solid ground would be a mile beneath her kicking feet.

Astrid had loved swimming occasionally in the rivers and streams of Berk, and sometimes on its beaches, but the idea of being stuck in the open ocean with nothing to rely on but her own energy, which she knew from experience was a finite resource, was genuinely frightening. The fact that she was going to be dropped only meters from the incoming fleet helped far less than it should have. She couldn't help but imagine Jormungandr the sea serpent bursting from the black depths, jaws wide open, and how helpless she would be.

"Isn't your full name Fearless Astrid Hofferson?"

"Shut up." She snapped. "Imagine all the things that are probably

living down there!"

"Fish are pretty frightening." Hiccup agreed.

"There's more than just fish in the ocean, idiot."

"Bigger fish. And is idiot a term of endearment?"

Astrid drove two of her knuckles into his back making him arch. "Ow, my kidneys!"

In retaliation, he pulled Toothless into multiple barrel rolls, throwing her out into the open air. The world spun and whirled into a great blue blur, but Astrid was still very much aware of that helpless, weightless feeling which always came with freefalling. She screamed, caught between rising fear, and boiling rage.

They retrieved her a moment later, Toothless catching her by her shoulders. Astrid roared at them as they swept down towards the fleet. "Hiccup, I am going to cut off your balls and feed them to a troll! I am going to rip out your tongue and throttle you with it! I'm going to cut a hole in your skull and gouge out your brain with a wooden spoon! Then feed it to you!"

"The wind is really whistling up here, Astrid!" he shouted down playfully. "I can't hear you."

"You're wearing a helmet you jackass!"

"So I am. That might be the problem, then."

The boy was certainly far bolder when he was sitting atop his dragon.

"Fuck you!" she shouted.

"Well next time use your words instead of punching me!" he shot back. "Now get in character, we're nearly there!"

They were indeed approaching the fleet at breakneck speed. She could see Berk's warriors scrambling across the decks for weapons. It occurred to her that they might actually fire. She glared up at Toothless' underbelly. "If I die from this, Hiccup, I swear to the gods I will kill you!"

"That sounds logical. Quick, what's my alternate name?"

"Arseface."

"Prometheus, but you get an 'A' for effort. When am I coming to visit Berk?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. I'll be ready with my axe!"

"Is that so? What do you think, Toothless? She wants to axe me. What height shall we drop her from?"

Astrid could have sworn she heard the dragon snigger.

* * *

><p>Berk was finally in sight! Stoick was feeling both relieved and anxious. Even with all the uneventful hours and miles the fleet had put between itself and that hellspawn, He was still in a state of near disbelief that they had managed so clean a getaway. There was a metaphorical shoe, he felt, still waiting to be dropped.</p>

This is why he reacted so strongly when Snotlout on the next longship over shouted a warning and pointed up into the sky.

A black shape was circling about four hundred meters above their heads. It was unmistakable, even at that distance. The mysterious rider and his night fury had followed them!

Stoick scowled. He knew it had been too easy! Far too easy! "Shields up! Bows at the ready! Prepare for an attack!"

There wasn't much they could do. Stoick had not seen or heard a night fury sinceâ€¦ since before Hiccup had died, but he remembered well their destructive power. The small fleet were sitting ducks, out in the open ocean. If the dragon decided to rain down fire, there was little any of the warriors could do to prevent their ships from being blown to pieces.

The Berkians cried out in alarm, reaching for bows and spears and anything they could get their hands on. Instead of taking them head on, the night fury remained high out of range. It spun in the air throwing a man-sized object off its back and catching it underneath. Then it dove towards the boats. The Vikings tensed, preparing let loose a volley of arrows.

Yet at the last second the black shape swerved to the side and circled at a fair distance. Stoick could hear shouts echoing from across the expanse of water. He squinted at the shape which was wiggling underneath the sleek black dragon. Blonde hair, a leather skirt, and a particularly familiar obstinate voiceâ€¦

"Hold your fire!" He called out, "Hold your fire! He's got Astrid!"

Gods... that young woman must have had the blessing of every god in Asgard for all the scrapes and struggles she had survived. Astrid the Fearless? No, she would have to be renamed: Astrid the Favored.

The night fury circled closer, and Stoick could make out its rider's lanky profile, standing in his stirrups. It was the strangest, most unnatural and disturbing sight he had ever witnessed. The phantom moved like a human, but Stoick knew he was something different. A god or a devil of some sort; humans could not ride dragons. The two were mortal enemies.

The night fury halted before the fleet, only about twenty meters from the bow of Stoick's ship. Its black claws were gripping Astrid's shoulders tightly. Silence fell across the longships, aside from the sound of water lapping at their hulls, and the steady rhythmic flapping of the beast's wings.

Stoick exchanged an apprehensive glance with Lars Thorston, the ship's captain, and then clambered to the bow, where he faced the

night fury head-on, staring straight into its slitted green eyes. The rider's eyes were in shadow, and Stoick could see nothing at all under his helmet. He decided it must be a shade, or a ghost of some kind. A foul thing, to be dealt with by the Goethi's magic, should it continue to haunt them. The trick lay in getting back to Goethi alive.

"Astrid?" he called out.

"I'm all right, sir!" she replied. "Just don't shoot me!"

"It could be a trick, sir!" Snotlout called out. He had maneuvered his ship around, and was approaching the rider from the side, staying a good twenty meters back. "She could be a demon too!"

"He's right, Chief." Lars said quietly, watching the dragon rider closely.

"If I'm a demon, Snotlout, I swear by Thor's name, you're dying first!" Astrid shot back, glaring down at the young Jorgenson.

"It's definitely not a trick." Stoick said, noting the shieldmaiden's glare. On longships all around them, Vikings were nocking arrows. Stoick raised a hand, and they all prepared to fire. The rider noted the movement, and his black leather armour creaked as he tensed in his saddle. His beast growled and narrowed its eyes.

Stoick addressed the rider. "You! What do you call yourself?"

The rider sat back in his seat, surprised at being addressed so directly, but Stoick was nothing if not direct.

"Prometheus." The apparition declared.

Whispers passed through the seated sailors, and across the fleet, weapons were gripped more tightly. "Proma-what?" "Is he casting a spell?" "He's a foreign dog. No Viking would ride a dragon!"

"I'm going to drop Hofferson." The masked rider declared. "Will you take her aboard?"

"I will." Stoick noted the grimace crossing Astrid's face. The foamy water was a good ten meters below her feet. Stoick gave her a sympathetic look, and a second later, the black dragon let go. The woman plummeted into the waves, waving her arms to keep her balance in the air. To her credit, she kept her legs together, toes pointed straight down, and entered the water with an enormous splash, throwing droplets across the bows of surrounding ships. A few seconds later she surfaced, treading water and swearing furiously.

A rope was handed up to Stoick, who tossed it into the water for her to grab hold. A few seconds later, another rope landed in the water, nearer to Astrid's position. It was being held on the other end by Snotlout and a few members of his crew. Astrid ignored the second line completely, kicking vigorously towards Stoick's rope, which she grabbed in a tight hold. He dragged her aboard, hand over hand, keeping an eye on the dragon rider, who had risen high above the ships, and out of range of the careful archers.

He reached into the water and dragged a coughing and spluttering

Astrid over the gunnel and into the boat, where she lay for a moment, breathing deeply and scowling into the wooden planks.

"Keep an eye on him!" Stoick ordered, pointing up at the rider and his reptilian steed. They had caught an updraft, and were hanging there in the air, suspended against the wind, floating in an almost gentle fashion. Lars and his crew obeyed, keeping their bows pointed upwards, ready to fire at the first sign of hostility.

Stoick shrugged off his bearskin cloak and wrapped it tightly around Astrid, who had begun to shiver. Her braid had come undone with all the activity, and he brushed a clump of wet hair out of her eyes, thinking back to the days when he had treated his son the same way. He felt a burst of fatherly fondness for the young woman. "Are you alright?"

"Fine." She said, her voice shaky. "I'm fine. He saved my life, sir." She stared up at the distant figure with a look of curiosity.

Stoick helped her into a sitting position, and then rose to his feet. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Rider!" but the figure was already rising up and out of sight, drifting into a patch of clouds and vanishing. Stoick looked back down at Astrid.

The young woman was hugging her sides and shivering, his bearskin cloak was wrapped tightly around her, but already soaked, and the wind was picking up.

"Son of a bitch." She rocked back and forth, glaring furiously at the wooden deck. "Son of a bitch! I can't believe he just dropped me!"

The deck creaked as Stoick took a knee beside her and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright, lass? Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine, sir."

"What manner of Devil is he?" Stoick asked, glancing upwards. Most of the crew were keeping their eyes skyward, searching for the black silhouette.

She shook her head. "Not a demon. Just a man."

"Who is he? Did you see his face? Any clan markings?"

Astrid glanced up at him, looking pale and somehow lost. She stared into his eyes for a few seconds before hanging her head. "No." She said, her voice a strange monotone. "He kept his helmet on the whole time."

"Men riding dragonsâ€|" Stoick sighed and ran a hand down his face. "Ragnarok's coming, Astrid. What are we to do?"

"I'm sorry, sir." She said, her voice still colorless.

"For what?" Stoick frowned.

"I didn't know about the dragon. The big one." She looked up at him, "If I'd known that thing was in the mountain, I wouldn't have led us there. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have-"

"Stop." Stoick gave her a gentle shake. "You meant the best for us. This wasn't your fault, lass. We're all alive to tell the tale."

Astrid shut her eyes and leaned back until her head thumped against the gunnel of the ship. "I married Snotlout for thisâ€| for nothing!" She snarled, thumping the deck with her fist.

"We'll get you home, Astrid, don't you worry." Stoick gave her a last pat on the shoulder and stood up, addressing both her, and the crew at large. "A hearty meal and a solid night's rest will work wonders for all of us, I think. We'll attack this again tomorrow."

"He's coming to Berk tomorrow" Astrid said, still seated against the side of the boat. Vikings across the length of the longship were pulling out oars, rowing for home.

"He told me. He said wants to talk to us." Astrid told him.

Stoick sighed and stared across the expanse of water at the distant island of Berk. His home, as it had been for three centuries of Vikings before him. It looked so very small from that distance. A tiny, fragile blip. A dark silhouette against the unending blue ocean. He wondered what kind of threat this new dragon rider posed, and how he could best protect his people.

* * *

><p>Their arrival back on Berk was the single strangest return Stoick had ever experienced. The village had been ecstatic of course, but also confused. Their fleet had arrived back completely intact and with no casualties at all. Cause for celebration. Yet the moment the fleet actually docked, Berkians picked up on their warriors' gloomy looks and worried skyward glances. The thunderous cheering died away as Berk's returning fighters wound their way single file up the multiple ramps and into the village. From there they split up to greet their families and commiserate. Whispers began to spread through the village of that Jotun's hellspawn which lived in the mountain, and of the mysterious dragon rider who had followed them home.</p>

As always, Stoick waited to make sure that he was the last off the boats, stepping off just behind Astrid. The young woman had fallen silent during the remainder of their trip. She was exhausted. Not physically, but emotionally. Something was eating away at her, and Stoick wondered just what she had seen after the Nadder picked her up off that beach. Perhaps it was the dragon rider which had set her in this strange mood. After all, dragons and Vikings were mortal enemies, and whatever the man's motives were, he was certainly no friend to Berk.

Stoick led Astrid through the crowds, straight to the Hofferson Hall and the waiting arms of her mother and father. He gave them each a nod. "Brunhilda, Haldor."

"Stoick." "Chief."

At his shoulder, Astrid nodded to each of them. His bearskin cloak was still wrapped tightly around her.

"Astrid's had a long day." Stoick explained awkwardly. "So have we all, but I know mine's not over yet."

"I'm fine, Chief." Astrid insisted, for the millionth time, but Stoick saw the exhaustion in her movements, and the mysterious confusion in her eyes. She had worn that strange expression ever since the dragon rider had dropped her with the fleet. Stoick had caught her several times, staring at him in pity? Worry? Consternation? Regardless, she was not acting as the stalwart, loyal warrior he had come to know, and it worried him.

He said, "I think what she needs now is rest, and affection. You know?" He nodded awkwardly at Brunhilda. "Motherly stuff."

The woman crossed her thick arms and gave him a dry look. "I'll do my best."

"I'm fine, chief!" Astrid declared forcefully.

Stoick merely pointed at the open door to the Hofferson Hall. Astrid sighed and glared at him, but did not protest when her mother wrapped her in a tight embrace and guided her inside.

* * *

><p>Brunhilda watched as her daughter shrugged off her soaking furs and retrieved a clean set of clothes. Astrid dried herself off and dressed in silence. The severity of her movements and the scowl on her young face suggested a storm inside her head.</p>

Brunhilda had been terrified when she watched Berk's fleet sail for the nest a second time. She recalled the agony she had felt seeing the ships return without Astrid, and the relief of her daughter's miraculous reappearance. But those few days in between had been utter hell. Every time Berkians sailed fort the dragon's nest it resulted in tragedy. Watching Astrid walking up the gangplank again was among the hardest things Brunhilda had ever done. There was no way, she felt, that the Gods would let her daughter get that lucky twice, and merely seeing her alive and once again standing in Hofferson hall was a victory worth celebrating.

Yet Astrid clearly felt differently, from the way she violently rolled her soaked tunic into a ball and threw it near the fire. Something was off. Not just in the fleet's strange return, but with Astrid herself.

"What happened out there, Astrid?" she asked carefully. "I hear you made it to the nest. For the first time in histo-"

"My plan failed."

"What do you mean?" Brunhilda had heard the whispers and strange tales which spread from the returning fleet. "You reached the nest, yes?"

"Yeah. But there's a giant dragon living there. We can't beat it, mum." Her daughter bent down and picked up her axe from the low bed she had rested it on. Astrid's eyes glinted in the firelight reflected from the cold steel blade. "We barely got away with our

lives. Berk is finished. The Viking Way won't cut it anymore. It won't solve our problems."

"Where are you getting this from, dear?" Brunhilda asked, gently moving closer.

"Today Iâ€| I met a man who rides dragons." Astrid met her mother's gaze. "For twenty years I've been learning every way to kill the beasts and it turns out our solution all along was to just make friends with them."

"You feel like you've wasted your time?" Brunhilda slid a hand over her daughter's tense shoulders, and began to rub in comforting circles. A man who rode dragons? It sounded far-fetched. Fanciful. Brunhilda would have worried her daughter was ill, if not for the fact she had heard the story already from several sailors. A man, in black armour, riding a night furyâ€|

"If people can ride dragons. Everything we know is wrong." Astrid said, looking back down at her axe. "Everythingâ€| everything Uncle Finn taught me â€|"

"Oh, Astrid!" Brunhilda pulled her daughter into a tight hug. She found Astrid's ear and whispered, "Finn taught you far more about being a Viking than how to fight dragons. You're strong, proud, and more stubborn than a Gronckle. You have a good heart, Astrid. That's what my brother gave you."

Much to her dismay, Astrid remained limp in her arms, her axe hanging at her side. "The Rider is coming back to Berk tomorrow. This is the breaking point. The end of the road. I know it is."

"We've weathered a lot of storms."

"Not like this." Astrid shook her head. "Nothing like what's coming. Everything's going to change. It has to. We have to."

"Why?"

"Because we can't beat them, mum." Astrid said quietly. "That giant monster at the nest was too big. We can't hurt it. Not with axes and swords and arrows. But his dragon wounded it. We can't fight Dragons the Viking way anymore. It won't work."

"All storms pass." Brunhilda said soothingly. "The trick is to keep your head on your shoulders. Don't let yourself get swept overboard."

"It's different."

Brunhilda was shaking her head. She took Astrid's hands in hers. "My daughter, listen to me. I've been alive a long time. This village has survived plagues, famines, droughts, earthquakes, hurricanes, Viking wars, and dragons. All in my lifetime. Whatever you think is coming, we'll survive it too. We're a hearty people."

But Astrid was shaking her head. "You don't understand. It's different this time, mum."

Brunhilda rolled her eyes. "How?"

"It's going to divide us."

"We've been divided before too, Astrid. You weren't yet born when Stoick and Alvin fought for the Chieftainship. A third of Berk left with Alvin."

Astrid sighed and threw up her hands. "I'm going out to train."

"Astrid!" Brunhilda protested. "Astrid—"

But the door had already closed.

* * *

><p>"Astrid's plan succeeded." Stoick announced to the crowd of curious Berkians. He was seated at his table in the great hall. Surrounding him were the heads of every major clan in the tribe, alongside the majority of those Vikings who had stayed behind. "Berk owes Astrid Hofferson a debt! Under my heir's leadership, we reached the nest. For the first time in our history, we set foot on the Dragon's own soil!"</p>

This pronouncement was received to roaring cheers and thunderous applause. He raised his hands to settle the crowd. "However, while we were there, we encountered a new enemy. A king dragon. A child of Loki. My friends, we now know we can reach the dragon's shore. But our fight is far from over. We must build bigger war machines. Sharper blades. More powerful bows. Gobber!"

"Yes, Stoick?" The blacksmith asked sourly, emerging from the crowd.

"Starting tomorrow, I intend to put ten men at your disposal. They will help you build bigger catapults, and more razorwire nets."

The crowd cheered again.

"This is all well and good, Chief, but what of the Dragon Rider?" Slagfid Saemingson asked. He was a valued warrior, as able on the barricades of Berk as he was on the high seas. He was also a close ally of the Haddock clan, and always had been.

The crowd fell silent, and a hundred curious faces watched Stoick with rapt attention. Stoick sighed and leaned back against his throne. "I'm sure you've all heard the stories. Yes, we encountered a man who rode a Night Fury."

"Encountered?" An older Viking warrior Bjorn Barrason laughed. "He saved the fleet. That Jotun would have burned us all if not for him."

"We are Vikings!" Stoick bellowed, silencing the man. "It is true it would have been a hard fight, and perhaps the rider did us a favor by letting us regroup, but Rider or not, we would have given as good as we got. Perhaps it was the Jotun who got lucky we decided to retreat."

At this pronouncement, those in the crowd who had stayed behind cheered. Those who had seen the giant beast looked skeptical, but under Stoick's glare they held their silence. Stoick knew that his declaration was patently false; the Vikings had barely escaped with their lives, and the giant would have burned the fleet in seconds if not for the rider's interference, but as chief, he couldn't let the village know what a disaster the whole trip had been. Not if they were to stick together and overcome the problems. He couldn't let them wallow in defeat. It had to feel like a victory.

Stoick said, "Tomorrow I plan to send Berk's sailors and tradesmen to Oswald the Agreeable. With his help, they are going make contact with the Rus. I want more weapons, and stronger armour. We will need it all if we are to kill this beast and rid ourselves of our dragon problem! The rest of us will redouble our efforts. We will stock more food, build more boats, and strengthen our defenses! If we are to win, we must be stronger than our enemies!"

"What of the dragon rider?" Halfgrim Hallkelson called out. The man had captained one of the fleet's ships.

"What of him?" Stoick responded aggressively.

"He's going to visit tomorrow."

"And when he lands we're going to kill him. Catch his beast in a razorwire net and let it chop itself to pieces."

"Butâ€œ he helped us."

"We're Vikings! We don't need help! Do you really think a man who rides dragons is any friend of ours?" many in the crowd were thinking it over, but they looked uncomfortable. The Vikings who had seen the rider's rescue first hand were shaking their heads. Too many of them were warriors Stoick trusted and needed. He said, "Just because the Rider fought with that Jotun, does not mean he intended to help us. We don't know who he is, or why he did what he did, but I don't want a damned Night Fury running around my village!"

Fishlegs leaned forward. "I agree with you, Stoick."

"Thank you, Fishlegs."

"It's certainly a risk." The young poet continued. "And we shouldn't let that dragon anywhere near the village. But if the man saved us, then perhaps we should we give him a day, chief? Just to find out what he wants. His monster can stay in the forest where it belongs."

This suggestion was received to general approval.

"And if it gets within a stone's throw of the village, we'll kill them both." Stoick replied. "A good suggestion, Fishlegs."

Fishlegs preened. "Thank you, Chief. I'm here to serve."

"If that is settled, we'll move on to other mattersâ€œ" Stoick leaned forward and planted both hands on the table. "What is the state of the village? Are the stores stocked? Are our quivers full? Have we repaired the damage from the last raid?"

* * *

><p>Astrid found Hiccup waiting in the Cove. He was lying on the riverbank, head and shoulders propped against Toothless' flank. The sun was beating down rather hard, having peaked about half an hour before. The surface of the water sparkled and shimmered before them as they dozed.</p>

Stormfly was there too, and she shot to her feet as Astrid entered the stone-walled clearing. She chirruped happily and stomped over, the noise rousing the other two, though neither of them got up.

Astrid greeted Stormfly first, scratching her chin and rubbing her flanks. The Nadder responded in kind, nuzzling her and sniffing at her hair.

"Hey, girl." Astrid cooed, smiling indulgently and wrapping her arms around Stormfly's neck. She tried to steal a small amount of comfort from her dragon's warmth and cheerfulness. Sensing something was off, Stormfly stepped back and cocked her head. She chirped curiously, and nudged Astrid's shoulder.

Astrid patted Stormfly again and stepped past her, walking over to Hiccup and Toothless. There was something about the way the sleek black dragon had wound himself around his rider, forming a protective ring, from head to tail.

Hiccup had loosened the straps of his armour and beneath it Astrid could see a sweat-soaked red tunic. The young man's eyes were puffy and slightly redder than usual, and he moved with the same lethargy that had descended upon Astrid the moment she looked Stoick in the eye and held her tongue.

"Hi Astrid." Hiccup smiled up at her, though it lacked his usual snarky flair. She sank to the sand beside him, and felt Stormfly sit down heavily behind her. In no time, she was lying against her dragon's side, mirroring Hiccup's arrangement. They both stared up at the sky, watching clouds slowly drift past and listening to the trickling water and the wind rustling through the forest.

She said, "I hate this."

"I know. You said."

"No, I mean... not just being dropped in the ocean." She stared up at a passing cloud. "I lied to my chief. I looked him right in the face and lied to him about you. I don't like that. I don't like being a traitor."

A few seconds of silence passed.

"When did he get gray hair?" Hiccup's voice floated in, a little more shaky than usual.

Astrid's brow wrinkled as she examined the fluffy white shapes hanging so high above her head. The same ones she had been soaring through that very morning. "What?"

"My dad. His beard was going gray. When did that start? It was red when I left."

She shrugged slowly. "I dunno. A little after you died, I think."

Hiccup took a sudden breath. Short and deep, it was practically a gasp. He let it out slowly. It was such a strange noise that she glanced down at him. He was staring wide-eyed at the blue expanse above their heads. He was blinking more often than usual, and his mouth was open. He gasped again, and a cold shock slid down Astrid's spine as she realized why his eyes were puffy and red; he had been crying.

She leaned back against Stormfly and looked back at the sky, giving him the dignity of a little privacy.

He said, "That's the first time I saw him since I left, andâ€|"

"That can't have been easy."

"I didn't expect it to be easy, but it wasn't supposed to be that hard, either. I don't know what I thought would happen when I saw him."

"You're going to have to do it again tomorrow. For a lot longer."

A wispy cloud passed overhead, carried on a gust of wind.

Astrid shifted, propping herself up until she could properly see him, lying as he was against Toothless' flank. The young man was still staring at the sky, brows furrowed and sorrowful. She said, "You know you're going to make an enemy of him, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"â€|yeah. Thanks." Hiccup frowned and sat up, scooting back until he was sitting upright, slouched against Toothless with his knees bent. He scooped up a palm-sized rock from between his feet and tossed it into the sparkling pond, where it landed with a quiet sploosh. The ripples spread out and lapped at the sandy shore. "Why do you think you're a traitor, Astrid?"

Astrid sighed and stared down at her own feet. "I realized that if I help you, my culture dies."

"How do you mean?"

"Our legends are about killing dragons. Our weapons are made to kill dragons. Our people are trained to kill dragons. We're a society of dragon killers! It's in our bones!"

"Yakshit."

Astrid raised her eyebrows, taken aback at the strength of his response. Hiccup looked equally as shocked at his own nerve, and he elaborated before her surprise could transform into indignation. "I

know what a dying civilization looks like, Astrid, and this isn't it. Berk has been killing dragons to survive, but if you find a better way, nothing's getting destroyed. You're just adapting. Growing |Learning."

"I guess."

He gave her a serious look. "What is it about fighting dragons that you're afraid of losing, exactly? Digging graves?"

"No."

"The constant fear?"

"No."

He cracked a smile. "The night watches?"

"I could do without those too." She admitted.

"Constantly rebuilding the same burnt houses? I bet that part never gets old."

"Shut up."

"Well?" his wry grin had returned, and Astrid realized she was grinning too. At that moment, sitting on the sunlit bank with the babbling brook beside her and Stormfly at her back, the horror and fear of the dragon attacks felt so far away that she didn't mind him joking. She marveled at how easily he had turned the conversation on its own head.

"I've been training to kill them for my entire life. It's what I'm used to. It's what I know."

"She said while using one as a pillow."

Astrid scowled and tossed a pebble at his head. "Shut up!"

* * *

><p>What Astrid, Hiccup, and Toothless did in the opening of this chapter was actually quite dangerous. Water doesn't compress when you hit it, and if you enter it the wrong way, you might as well be hitting concrete for all the damage it's going to do you. I had the privilege of traveling through Australia a while back, but I actually watched a friend break her back jumping off the top of an eight meter tall waterfall. Jumping into water is a serious matter, so stay safe, kids.

And how about RTTE. Hugely awesome, no? I love Tuffnut, and they basically let the voice actor run wild for that entire season. My god it's glorious.

The Chicken is Not Amused.

29. Chapter 29

Prodigal Son 29

The sky had grown into a wondrous kaleidoscope of oranges and purples by the time Astrid slipped back into the village. She headed for the Hofferson Hall out of habit, and then remembered that she did not belong to that clan anymore. Guilt flooded her as she remembered the way she had simply walked out on her mother. It was a first in their relationship, but Astrid had realized she just couldn't handle it.

She desperately wanted to tell her mother everything. All of her secrets about Hiccup and Stormfly and the sketch. The real reasons things had played out the way they did, but it was too risky. Brunhilda could keep small secrets, Astrid knew, things like how she had managed to get her clothes so dirty, or the times she had disobeyed her father's sometimes strict rules and gone out to help during the raids.

However this was different. The secrets Astrid carried were going to change Berk. Tear it apart and rebuild it piece by piece, and it had to be done. The Hoffersons were by nature hard workers, tough fighters, and loyal subjects. No matter how much she wanted to, Astrid simply couldn't trust anyone in her family with the knowledge that Berk's lost heir was riding a Night Fury around the isles. There was too much at stake.

Then there was the marriage to Snotlout. Astrid had managed to avoid him, thus far, but she knew eventually she would have to confront that reality. Brunhilda more than almost anyone else understood the level of Astrid's distaste for the man-child. Astrid knew that if she revealed the way the Jorgensons had blackmailed her, the Hoffersons would take it public and declare a feud. Either with the Jorgensons, or with Stoick.

Technically not much could come of it, because Stoick owned her, and could marry her off as he saw fit, but there was Viking Law, and there were Viking Morals. Where one was sure to fail, an appeal to the other might make progress. The Jorgensons were far from popular, but it was an extra layer of trouble which Hiccup couldn't afford. Not if he was going to put Berk on dragonback. She realized she was starting to think like Fishlegs, and slapped herself gently upside the head.

She paused outside the Hofferson door, arm outstretched and ready to knock. She wanted to apologize at least. She was just about to knock when the door opened, revealing Brunhilda Hofferson, silhouetted against the flickering orange flames in the pit behind her.

The smell of roasting boar flooded out onto the dirt path, making Astrid's mouth water. She could hear her cousins and sisters talking and laughing, gathered around the warm hearth.

Brunhilda was carrying a bucket with her, and upon seeing her daughter, she immediately set it down. "Astrid!"

"Hi mum." Astrid shifted uncomfortably. "I just wanted to say sorry. I shouldn't have walked out like that. It was rude."

Brunhilda embraced her again, and this time Astrid responded wholeheartedly.

"I wish I knew what was wrong, Astrid." Her mother murmured. "You've managed to be at the center of all Berk's trouble for a month now. You're not acting like yourself, running off into the woods for hours and hours, saying you loved the Haddock boy. It nearly killed me when you sailed off the first time and didn't come back. And earlier today you said Berk was finished. I've never heard you say anything like that before. That's not the Astrid I know. What's going on?"

"Iâ€| I can't tell you, mum. I'm sorry. I need to figure this one out on my own."

Brunhilda crossed her arms and gave her daughter a concerned examination, searching her face for some hint, or clue. "Alright," she said, "Justâ€| remember we love you, Astrid. And if you ever need anything, we're here."

"I know. Thanks mum."

Brunhilda smirked. "Now you head back to that old badger and let him know of my displeasure; a Nadder nearly ate you, by all accounts."

"Ha. Yes ma'am." Astrid threw out a playful salute, which Brunhilda returned, before emptying her bucket and stepping back inside.

* * *

><p>Haddock Hall was warm and comfortable. A merry fire was burning in the hearth, and a pot of stew was boiling over it. It did not smell as good as Brunhilda's cooking, but Astrid was so hungry it hardly mattered.</p>

Stoick was seated at the table, tearing bites off a loaf of bread. He looked quite cheerful. "Hello Astrid. Welcome back."

"Thank you, sir."

"Stoick will do." He said genially. He motioned at the chair opposite him. A bowl and a plate had been set there.

"We were so close, Astrid!" he exclaimed excitedly as she took a seat. "So bloody close! Using the dragon's own fears against them? Hah! Brilliant! I've ordered that live eels be captured so that we can hang them from the storehouse roof during raids."

"I'm sure that'll keep some of the dragons away, sir." Astrid agreed loyally.

"Mmhmm! Mmhmm! What do you think of Fishlegs?" Stoick asked in a more businesslike tone.

Cagey? Snake-like? Scheming? Conniving? Astrid settled on "Smart."

"I thought so too. Never gave him much credit. I mean, what use is poetry? It won't kill dragons and it won't protect the village. But the man has a brain in his head. He was supportive all through the meeting today. I'm thinking of grooming him for a position of some sort."

Astrid hesitated. "I should have been at the meeting today, sir. I'm sorry—"

Stoick waved a dismissive hand, chewing quickly to swallow a bite of food. "Don't trouble yourself, lass." He laughed and settled back in his chair, more at ease than Astrid had ever seen him. "You've already done more than I could have ever hoped!"

"Thank you. You seem in a good mood." Astrid said, not sure whether to feel more surprised or amused. Bubbly was a word she would never ever have used to describe Stoick the Vast, but now it seemed to be the only word that fit.

"More alive than I've felt in years." Stoick admitted freely. "We reached the nest, Astrid! The end is in sight! After three hundred years of war! Look!" He reached under the table to the vacant chair and produced a stack of papers. With a shock, Astrid realized they were some of Hiccup's old sketches.

"I was going to send sailors out to contact the Rus, and search the world for war machines, but then Fishlegs said we had them here at home, and it got me looking through Hiccup's doodles." Stoick stopped suddenly, staring down at them as a wave of grief swept through him. He ran a hand down his beard and let out a long breath.

"I'm glad, sir." Astrid said quietly. When Hiccup died, Stoick had been left with an enormous gaping hole in his life. His pain was obvious to absolutely everyone on the island. None of them respected him any less, but they all watched the best parts of his personality faded, to be replaced by gruffness and ill-humor.

"Yesâ€œ| wellâ€œ|" Stoick shifted awkwardly in his seat. "It wasn't easy. I know Hiccup was not exactly the warrior I wanted, but he had a certain talent. I meanâ€œ| look at this!"

Stick passed Astrid a sketch. It was a carefully labeled siege engine. An enormous crossbow powered by winding ropes and winches. The mechanics made Astrid's head spin, but its end purpose was quite clear.

"It's a cart-mounted crossbow." Stoick said, an eager, dangerous light shining in his eyes, "It can fire an entire bundle of arrows all at once. A brigade's worth of bowmen from one machine. And it only takes five men to operate! Imagine it, Astrid! Five or six of these mounted on longships, pointed at that great bloody hole we made. Remember the way those dragons came swarming out? Well next time: Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!" his fist banged the table. We'll pull most of them out of the sky before they know what hit them! Fire a few razorwire strands to slice up their wings. Then ten men could wade ashore and kill a hundred of the devils while they're dying on the beach!" He held up the page and examined it with a look of great pride. "Hiccup may be dead, but when we go back, he'll avenge himself! That's true poetry, Astrid. Not any of Fishlegs slop. That is the Poetry of Battle."

"A lot of dragons will die that way."

"Ha! You said that like it was a bad thing!"

Had she? Astrid made a mental note to keeping a tighter grip on her

own impulsive mouth. Stoick lifted a mug to his lips and took a long deep draught of the mead within. He set it down and let out a satisfied sigh, staring happily at the sketches. An image exploded into her mind: Stormfly caught in a razorwire net, struggling to escape the pain, and in so doing shredding the very flesh from her own bones. Astrid felt sick.

"You know," Stoick said sadly, "I never really told Hiccup how proud I always was of him. I thought he knew, butâ€œ" he shook his head. "I've never been quite sure. That's the worst part of losing him. The bits I'm not sure about. The things I didn't sayâ€œ" he looked back up at her. "Did he ever say anything to you?"

_HE'S A MILE AWAY! _Astrid wanted to scream it, _YOU SAW HIM EARLIER TODAY AND NOW HE'S ON THE ISLAND! JUST PULL YOUR HEAD OUT OF YOUR-

—
She bit her tongue for a moment, and centered herself, pushing the handsome auburn-haired dragon rider out of her mind with limited success. She tried to remember what she could of the little kid who had hated everything about his own people. "Heâ€œ enjoyed that." She pointed at the sketches, "Drawing and working in the forge with Gobber. I think heâ€œ found ways to make himself proud."

Stoick nodded sadly. "Thank you, Astrid. You knowâ€œ you would have been really good for him. A great influence. No more hunting for trolls. You would have made a man of him."

"Thank you, sir." She once again tried to banish the new Hiccup Haddock from her mind. Stoick was discussing the fourteen-year-old fishbone, not the twenty-two year old daredevil. It wouldn't do to confuse the two of them. All the same, perhaps it was time to bring up the Big Meeting.

"And what about the Dragon Rider?" she asked carefully. "He's coming back tomorrow."

"Ah, yes. What was his name?" Stoick responded thoughtfully. "Proma? Promee? Prahâ€œ I can't bloody well remember. Some foreign tripe."

"I can't remember his name either." Astrid admitted, and that much was absolutely true.

"No matter." Stoick shrugged, raising the mug to his lips. "When he lands, we'll give him a day to explain why he's a traitor to our entire species, then we'll plant an axe in his chest."

"No!" the word escaped before she could clamp her own mouth shut.

Stoick thumped the mug down on the table and fixed her with a suspicious look. "What is the matter with you today, Astrid?"

"Heâ€œ He saved my life, sir! I owe him more than an axe blade." She said rapidly realizing that she'd have to commit. There was no backing off.

"He rides dragons, lass! He's no friend of ours!"

"We're not killing him! I owe him a blood debt! Every person on that expedition does!"

"Blood debt!" Stoick spat, "He rides the devils! I'm the chief, and blood debt or no if he's friends with the beasts that killed my son, if he's their master, I'll cut him down where he stands."

"I'll take it to Gothi!"

"I am the Chief!" Stoick thundered, red-faced and snarling. He slammed both fists onto the table with a thud that shook the cutlery.

"And I'm your heir!" Astrid challenged, "I'm looking out for Berk. You want to forswear a blood debt, and anger the gods? I bet they'll lead that Jotun's spawn straight back here as retribution! This is the second time I've escaped certain death. I'd be a fool to spit on their favor, and I'm not going to let you do it either!"

"What if he controls them, Astrid? What if all along it was him behind the attacks?"

"He's not!"

"How do you know?"

"Iâ€¢!" Astrid gaped, her mind racing to catch up with her tongue. "The only dragon I've seen actually cooperate with him is that night fury. That giant on the beach seemed bent on killing him, and the Nadder that carried me off was none too happy either." Gods above, lying was becoming far too easy.

"Shall we just open our doors and let a night fury wander into our village? Wait until it gobbles up a child before we decide it was a mistake?"

"You can't just lump things into two categories, sir. There might be middle ground here, that's all I'm saying."

"Middle ground!"

"Alright!" Astrid slapped the table, terrified and exhilarated at the same time, but she remembered her mother's advice: keep your head on your shoulders. "You want a bottom line? The Rider rides Dragons! Either he's a god or a man. If he's a god, then attacking him with an axe will end badly for us. If the Rider is a Man, then he's already trained that Night Fury not to eat people or it would have eaten him."

"Train a night fury?" Stoick demanded incredulously, "Would you listen to yourself, Astrid? You've gone mad!"

"What other explanation is there, sir?"

Stoick scoffed. "This entire conversation is absurd! I think I'll eat alone tonight."

They stared at each other, both red-faced and scowling. All traces of warmth and humor had vanished. Only once had she ever seen him this angry: six and a half years ago, right after his argument with

Gobber. Stoick's fury was a terrible, oppressive force, and the very air inside the room felt toxic to breathe. Even so, Astrid was a Viking, determined and stubborn as an ox.

"Don't kill him." She said defiantly, "You'll anger the gods-"

"Any god who would weep at the death of a dragon rider, doesn't deserve our worship." Stoick replied angrily. "Now get out. This house is for true Vikings."

* * *

><p>Astrid collapsed against the door of Haddock Hall, breathing heavily and trying to collect her scattered thoughts. Stoick's glare had hit her with the force of an axe blow, and with his declaration she realized she had effectively ended their relationship. It would be a long time before Stoick the Vast looked upon Astrid Hofferson with a friendly eye. If he ever did again. No wonder Fishlegs was always skulking in the shadows. Stoick met force with force, and there was no one on the island who could match him.</p>

With a shock, she realized that she had lost an ally in her fight to avoid marrying Snotlout. In her fight to save Berk. She felt cast out, flapping freely in a cold, harsh wind. The Island, with its darkened doorways and shadowy streets looked foreboding and unwelcoming.

Where could she go? Not to Hofferson Hall. Astrid didn't think she could handle the shame of walking through that door at that moment. She fumbled blindly down the path, feeling lost and terribly alone.

On the far side of the island, she saw a light. The Forge was lit. smoke billowed from the chimney, rising up and away, silhouetted for a moment against the dwindling evening light on the very edge of the horizon before joining with the darkness of the night sky above.

It looked like salvation, and she headed towards it, tripping over unseen roots and rocks. As she neared the building, she could see Gobber moving about inside, his face grim and determined, focused on his craft.

She reached the forge's open doorway and leaned against the thick timber frame.

"Astrid. What are you doing up at this hour?" The smith spared her barely a glance, caught up in his work as he bustled from the forge to his workbench and back. A large chunk of metal was heating in the forge itself.

"I just had a fight with Stoick." She said, surprised at how plaintive her own voice sounded.

It took a moment for those words to sink into Gobber's busy head, but suddenly he was all concern, his work forgotten. He swept a pile of dirty rags off a tall stool and pulled her into the comforting heat of the forge, setting her down upon it. His voice was gentle and friendly, in complete contrast to his coal-blackened, bear-like appearance. "Wha' happened, lass?"

"It'sâ€|" Astrid stopped, unsure as to how much she could say. Argument or not, Stoick was still her chief, and she didn't want to disrespect him.

Gobber smiled sympathetically. "This isn't the first time someone's wandered from Haddock Hall down here to the forge, Astrid. Hiccup used to spend every second night here up until he disappeared. I'm well acquainted with Stoick's faults."

The Forge hissed and spattered, and Gobber paused a moment, hurrying back to check on whatever half-baked creation was cooking within it. He scooped up some coals from a pile nearby and mixed them into the heat. Being a blacksmith was hard work, and one's attention could never be one hundred percent off-task, but his absence gave Astrid a moment to ponder just how much her life had grown to resemble the younger Hiccup's last months on Berk.

"Alrigh'." Gobber pumped the bellows five or six times, and the heat seemed to increase tenfold as the cooler coals inside ignited. "Wha' happened?"

"You know I was saved by a dragon rider?"

"Aye. I know. The entire island knows the story. Strange days, eh?" The smith gave his bellows a few more solid pumps and pulled out the glowing hot chunk of metal, giving it a quick examination. "And he's comin' for a visi' tomorrow, I understand. Stoick'll give him a day. It was discussed at the meeting."

"Stoick plans to kill him in the end."

"Our illustrious leader can be a little boar-headed at times." Gobber said, stuffing the metal deeper into the hot coals. "I'm going ta assume yeh have a problem with his plan?"

"Yeah. I'm afraid it'll anger the gods." Not true, but a useful fiction. Godsâ€| Astrid had spent far too much time around Fishlegs.

"Best take it to Gothi, then. She speaks for them." Gobber suggested, huffing as he pumped the bellows. The coals in his forge grew red hot, and a small flame danced along the edge of the glowing metal bar within. "She might be the only person on this island he still fears. And the only person who doesn't fear him."

"He said that Gods who would worry about him killing a dragon rider don't deserve our worship."

"Heh heh heh! What a load'a hot air. These'd be the same gods who've kept _you_ alive then, eh?" Gobber laughed, and the sound was as comforting his forge's glow in the darkness. "Yer not one of Loki's creatures, Astrid. Yer a daughter of Thor, and Stoick might bluster but he would'na dare spite the God of Thunder. Take it to Gothi and she'll put the fear back into him."

Astrid felt considerably more cheerful at this pronouncement. She had felt so rudderless, wandering down to the forge, but her feet were once again on solid ground. "Gobberâ€| I appreciate it, but we weren't exactly on good terms before. Why are you being so friendly?"

The smith shrugged. "Because I've been on the wrong end of Stoick's stubborn mouth meself once or twice. Because I don't want tha' boulder-brained yak to rule this island without someone around to second-guess him. Because wha' he done to yeh tonight, he done the same to Hiccup far too bloody often. And because if Hiccup were here now, lie or not I'd never hear the end of it if I did'na help yeh." He shot Astrid a smile. "I'd do damned near anything for tha' lad, and he'd forgive yeh anything. Now, you run off to Gothi, and tomorrow the old hag'll set Stoick straight and proper for yeh."

"Old hag?" Astrid exclaimed, horrified, "You can't call her that!"

"I can and I will!" the smith shot back, playfully defiant. "Every week she gives me some witch brew ta keep my stumps from achin', and I've never tasted a fouler drink in my whole life. She's a terrible hag and the best, smartest damned woman on the island. Now you go off to her, and when yeh come back I'll set yeh up in the back of the forge. Kept a cot there from Hiccup's days. It's as god a bed as any."

* * *

><p>Gothi's hut was built on stilts at the edge of a high, windy cliff outside Berk's defenses. Yet despite the wind, it had never fallen over, and despite the dragon raids, it had never been burned. That alone was enough to convince most of Berk of Gothi's divine connections.</p>

Gothi was a mystery to most Berkians. A figure shrouded in myth and fable. She presided over Berk's most important religious and social events, yet kept herself to herself. She was Berk's healer, and as such, was in high demand, with an entire hierarchy of pupils to help her deal with the scrapes, burns, and other wounds Berkians sustained on a regular basis.

As a young child, Astrid remembered playing with her friends (most of whom had died over a series of brutal raids), daring them to climb the staircase up to Gothi's hut. None of them had made it, of course. They all lost their nerve after a short way up the long, winding staircase. Stories circulated forever about the horrible things Gothi did to misbehaving children.

As an adult, Astrid had never required the Gothi's services. She had never been seriously wounded, and while she believed in the Gods, she was not as diligent a worshipper as some on the island. Astrid believed firmly that the best way to honor Thor and Odin was to train and fight, as she had sworn to do at the holy temple of Uppsala, all those years ago. She was a guardian, and why sacrifice goats and pigs and sheep and yaks when every drop of dragon blood could be spilled in Odin's name.

As she climbed through the darkness, up the rickety stairs, Astrid realized that this was the first time she had ever sought Gothi out. It was a slow climb. Night had fallen and despite the brightness of the stars above her head, Astrid still had to feel out every treacherous step. She paused at the top, wondering if it was rude to knock at this time of the evening, but she remembered that Hiccup's

life was at stake, and pounded on the door.

It opened a moment later with a loud creak. Gothi was standing in the doorway using her staff for support. She looked slightly put out as she glared up at Astrid. Her shoulders were hunched and wizened with age, and her face was as wrinkly as a tortoise. Yet her eyes were as deeply intelligent as an owl's, and as sharp as a hawk's.

Astrid fell to one knee immediately, head bowed. "Gothi, forgive me for waking you, but I seek your counsel."

She heard the clack of the Gothi's staff hitting her wooden deck, and the rattling of the dried, seed-filled pods she hung from it. When she shook her staff, it sounded like rain, Astrid knew. She felt gnarled fingers wrap themselves in her hair, and Gothi pulled her head up to stare searchingly into her eyes. The witch's hawkish brows furrowed as she turned Astrid's head to and fro, examining her from all angles. At last she let go and stepped back, clacking her staff twice on her deck and pointing into her hut, prompting her visitor inside.

Astrid obeyed, rising to her feet and stepped across the stoop as modestly as she could. Gothi's hut was a rickety place, yet quite cozy on the inside. There was not much floor space, but the ceiling was high and every wall was covered in shelves full of herbs and salts and other potion ingredients. A few candles provided a meager light.

Gothi shuffled in behind her and shut the door.

At the center of the room was a wide pit, filled with a thin layer of sand. Gothi directed her to take a seat at one side, tapping the floor insistently until Astrid lowered herself to her knees. The old witch pulled up a low stool and took a seat on the opposite side of the pit. She reached out with her staff and traced a rune into the sand between them.

_Speak! _It read.

"Wise Gothi, a visitor is coming to Berk tomorrow."

The witch nodded expectantly and drew a stickman atop a dragon, moving her staff with surprising grace and precision considering her age and outward frailness. She gave her drawing a slight smile and looked up at Astrid.

"You already know about him?"

Gothi nodded.

"Then you know he saved my life in the heat of battle and delivered me back to the fleet. I owe him a blood debt."

She nodded again.

"I thought soâ€œ!" Astrid let out a long breath. She owed Hiccup Haddock, Berk's talking fishbone a blood debt. How the world turnedâ€œ! And he wasn't exactly a fishbone anymore. She said, "Stoick wants to kill him."

Gothi rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. I guess that's not exactly surprising newsâ€|" Astrid muttered. "It's very â€|Stoick."

Gothi nodded, a hint of amusement twinkling in her eye. Astrid suddenly felt far more at ease, wondering why she had been so terrified of speaking with the witch when she was younger.

"I owe the Rider a blood debt, Gothi. I cannot let him die. I'd have no honor, and it would anger the gods, but I cannot fight my chief! Gothi, help me. I need a third option."

Gothi stared down quizzically at the stickman in her sketch. She looked back up at Astrid and tilted her head to the side, giving her a thorough examination. Her hawk eyes bored right into Astrid's soul and she felt as though her secrets were being extracted and dissected one by one. Everything from her taking the extra slice of bread when she was five, to the image of Berk's sweat-soaked, auburn-haired heir, relaxing against his night fury. She wondered if Gothi already knew Hiccup's true identity, and his plans for the village. Had the Gods told her yet?

"Gothi, if the gods speak to you, then you know how important this is that he survive. I can't stop Stoick, and Gobber said you'd help me. Please."

Satisfied, Gothi blinked and looked back down at the sand pit. Astrid felt like a trout have just been released and tossed back into the river. The witch traced out a set of scales beside the drawing of the stick figure.

"Balance? You want a trade?" Astrid asked.

She nodded.

"What can I do?"

Gothi circled the stick-man in her drawing of the dragon rider, and tapped the floor beside her sand pit.

"Bring him here?"

She nodded one last time and pointed at the door.

"I will, Gothi. Thank you for your wise council." Astrid rose to her feet and bowed at the older woman. She strode towards the door, but as she reached the threshold, her steps faltered and she turned back. "Do you already know who he is, Gothi?"

The old woman's wrinkled face was completely unreadable.

"He's proof that we can train dragons. Everything we know is wrong. Berk will come apart at the seams."

Still Gothi remained immobile, but the flickering candlelight granted her stare an ethereal, uncomfortable quality. Astrid found herself babbling, all of her fears and worries rising up and bubbling out in one great outburst. "We're Vikings through and through, but that's not enough to beat that monster at the Nest. I want what's best for

my tribe, but I don't want to lose everything we value in the process. Hic- I mean, the Rider laughed it off, but I don't know what to do. How do I know what's right?"

The Gothi sat in silence for a long time, watching Astrid, who didn't have the strength left to look away. She had nearly slipped up. Godsâ€œ! this was why people feared talking to the Gothi; her silence prompted others to talk as they tried to fill the void. A Viking could spill her guts in seconds. Every secret she had laid bare. It was downright dangerous.

Eventually the older woman looked away. She put her hand over her mouth and stared blankly into space, her hawkish brow furrowed. She motioned Astrid over with one craggy finger, and brushed the sand around in her pit, wiping out the previous tracings. When the pit was clear, she began to write, brushing new blocky runes into the sand:

Figure out what you can't live with. Do the opposite.

* * *

><p>According to my (admittedly limited) research, reading was largely a male activity in Viking culture. This is another instance where I'm bending history a bit to fit the story better. I think this Berk is **a more adult take on**** the Berk from the movies and the shows, so when it comes to this place, I'll go with movie and show logic before I reach out to real Viking culture for my answers. Women can read in the show, so they can here too.**

**And how great is RTTE? Seriously? Gets better every time I watch it. **

"**Table Boy, thih water ih luke-warm! We pacifically akked for cauldling if I'm not mikayken."**

"**Fine! Toothleh, plamah blah!"**

Ooh, also I have a tumblr page now, which I have no idea how to use. If anyone could lend me a hand I'd appreciate it... :/

30. Chapter 30

Prodigal Son 30

Faint beams of pre-dawn light shone through the plank walls which made up the back room behind Gobber's forge. One hit the face of Astrid, who was curled up on the little wooden cot. It was short enough that she had been forced to scrunch up to keep her legs from sticking out the bottom. As dawn broke across the horizon, sunlight flooded through the shack, forcing her to squint and pulling her back into the waking world. She grimaced as memories of the previous evening flooded in, reminding her why she was on a low cot behind Gobber's forge instead of her bed at home or in Hiccup's bed at the Haddock Hall. Astrid pulled her threadbare blanket up, throwing the corner over her face to give herself a few more minutes of comforting darkness in the hopes that sleep would once again swallow her.

The floorboards above her head creaked, and she heard a loud yawn as Gobber awoke. The smith slept in a bed upstairs, above his spare room. He had long ago learned that it was far warmer up there, where heat from the forge gathered. As he rose out of bed and stretched, little trails of dust landed on her, falling from wherever he stepped. The stairs creaked under his weight, and the smell of smoke and sweat followed him down into the forge, drifting into the back room where she lay. Astrid heard him clanking around the shop, and then the sound of a striker throwing sparks. She realized he was relighting the forge. Silence fell and gradually she could hear the flickering crackle of a small blaze, and the sound of Gobber puffing on it. Then she heard the creaking of the bellows, and Gobber began to sing, belting out with the rhythm of his work, "Well I've got my axe and I've got my mace and I've got my wife with the ugly face, I'm a Viking through and through!"

It was the end of her attempts to stay asleep.

Astrid groaned and rolled out of bed, only to meet the floor a mere foot below. She landed on her hands and knees and scowled at the planks for no reason beyond general ill humor. The blanket came with her and it took her a moment longer than she felt it should have to get untangled and on her feet. She felt blindly for her axe and realized that somewhere along the line, she had already strung it across her back where it belonged. That was Berk's morning routine: Wake up, find axe, open eyes, and get out of bed. Maybe yawn and stretch.

She stepped into the forge, rubbing knots out of the back of her neck.

"Good morning Astrid!" Gobber said cheerfully, pumping the bellows.

"Morning." She stared down at the rectangular hunk of metal which was sitting cold on the anvil, where he'd left it the night before. "What are you making?"

"A billhook fer cuttin' branches and roots. Yeh know, most of the time I'm makin' weapons. But every so often someone needs a tool! That's when things get excitin'." He winked at her.

"What's the most boring part?"

"The nails. The amount of re-buildin' we do, we need buckets and buckets'o the bloody things."

Astrid remembered; one of the first jobs young children were allowed to do to help with the war effort on Berk was to strip burned homes of nails and other metal objects which could be melted down and re-used. Every home had so many weapons in it and homes were burnt down so frequently that Gobber very rarely ran out of scrap metal. Occasionally the children uncovered a half-melted axe head, or a mace, and Gobber would give them a treat. Occasionally they uncovered a corpse, smelling of burned hair and charred fleshâ€¦ yet the teeth were always whiteâ€¦

Did yeh talk ta Gothi?"

"Hmm?" She blinked and looked up at him in confusion, still trying to

shake off sleep.

"Did yeh speak ta Gothi?" Gobber asked patiently, still pumping air through the coals. The fire grew brighter and brighter by the second.

_Figure out what you can't live with. Do the opposite. _"Yeah. Yes. She'll help."

"Glad ta hear it," He said with satisfaction, huffing as he pulled down on the enormous lever. "What do yeh have ta do fer her in return?"

"Iâ€| she wantedâ€| other secrets."

"Tha's it?" Gobber raised his eyebrows. "Some days gettin' favors from that old bat is like pullin' teeth. Other daysâ€| ah, maybe she just has a soft spot for yeh."

"If you stopped calling her an old bat, that might help." Astrid muttered, watching him work.

The blacksmith chuckled. "Yeh just wait till yeh get yer first big battle wound, Astrid. The moment she puts her salts in to clean it yeh'll call her damned near anything that comes to mind. Yeh'll just wish the dragon had ended yeh instead."

Astrid smiled at him, and he smiled right back, a hint of mischief in his eyes. "When is our guest of honor arriving?"

"No idea."

"Well then no point in worrying." Gobber let go of the bellows, and scanned the smithy. "Now, where did I put my handâ€|?"

Astrid spotted a likely looking clamp, which the grateful blacksmith took and attached to his stump. He picked up a pair of tongs with his other hand and shoved his half-finished billhook deep into the glowing coals. "Rightâ€|!"

"Gobber, thanks for letting me stay here last night."

"Any time yeh need to, Astrid. Whenever yeh need to escape the old yak." He chuckled warmly and they shared a smile before she wandered off into Berk. Sunlight had just hit the tip of the mountain, making the snow-shod peak shine like a diamond.

Astrid avoided her house out of embarrassment. She did not want to let her family know she had already made an enemy of Berk's chief. On the far hill at the other end of Berk, Haddock Hall stood proud and tall, though with all that had occurred the night before, she banished the thought of approaching it. Instead she headed for the docks.

The ramps were steep and slippery in the early morning, and avoided by the general population until the sun had dried them out. Stoick had ordered planks to be nailed cross-ways all the way down so that the sailors and fishermen could climb in safety. Due to her years of training, Astrid was also quick on her feet, able to keep her balance. Climbing down cliff-face ramps was little trouble for

her.

The sailors who were out on the water all day awoke before dawn to set out while the wind was light and the water calm. The docks were completely deserted, and Astrid knew they would be for some time to come. She kicked around on the docks for a little while, listen to the calming sound of water, lapping at the logs of timber on which the dock rested. Each of them had an enormous build-up of barnacles which started around the high-tide line, and coated the logs all the way down to their bases, buried deep under the murky water. Astrid could see starfish of various sizes and colors wrapped around each wooden pillar, and she sat there for some time, taking in the salty scent and the feel of the cool air on her skin. It was going to be a rough day, and she wanted to savor that moment of peace.

* * *

><p>Dawn broke, and found the docks deserted, but a basket of fish was missing. Astrid Hofferson was carrying it deep into the forest, towards Raven Point. Stormfly welcomed her with the usual enthusiasm, hopping from one foot to the other, and flapping her colourful wings.</p>

"It's a greeting dance." Hiccup said from somewhere behind her.

Astrid turned. He was crouched nearby on an enormous flat boulder across which Toothless was spread luxuriously. The night fury's saddle and false tail had been placed carefully to the side. The night fury was bare; all sleek black scales and powerful muscle. Hiccup was rubbing his dragon's flanks and back with an oil or ointment of some sort. It made his scales glow as they caught the meager, grey light of dawn.

Astrid emptied her fish basket for Stormfly, and watched the dragon devour it, stroking its neck gently. After the dragon had eaten its fill, she scampered up onto the boulder and clambered over to join Hiccup and Toothless. As she grew close, she became aware of the foul salty stench of the oil Hiccup was using.

"Fish oil," the young man explained, rubbing both hands down Toothless' tail. The dragon let out a satisfied grumble, and yawned, his mouth opening wide before he settled down on his paws and let his eyes shut.

"Stinks to high heaven, but you love it, don't you, bud?" Hiccup grinned at his dragon, who let out a snort, and a small puff of smoke. "His saddle chafes. So does his prosthetic."

Astrid glanced down at the ragged tear, and the pale scar which ran along the end of the night fury's tail. There were areas of his skin where scales had been worn off by the straps and mechanisms Hiccup had attached to him.

"I like to pamper him every so often." Hiccup said, rubbing the oil into the sore areas. "Makes me feel better. And you too, right Toothless?" The dragon let out a noncommittal noise and kept his eyes shut.

Astrid sank to her knees beside the dragon rider, watching the night

fury's chest expand and contract with each gentle breath. She said, "Do you think it hurt him? Losing his tail?"

Toothless's head snapped over and the dragon gave her an incredulous look, eyes wide with an almost human look of disbelief. Little tendrils of smoke curled from each nostril.

"We don't really like to think about it, to be honest. That was a bad day for him."

Toothless crooned a sorrowful agreement, and laid his head on his paws again. Hiccup, meanwhile, had moved around, and was working his way up the dragon's other side. The young man had discarded his armour completely, dressed in a ragged, pale, short-sleeved tunic with brown leggings. As he worked, she found her eyes drifting across his forearms, watching the way he moved as he worked the oil in; gently, yet with a firm gracefulness which Berkians lacked. His skin was tanned to brown and, like Gobber's, covered in dozens of small burns and scrapes. She wondered if he had made use of his blacksmith skills during his time away.

"I had an argument with your dad yesterday. Had to sleep at Gobbers'."

Hiccup's brow furrowed, and he shot her a concerned look over the ridge of Toothless' spines.

"How often did you sleep at Gobber's forge, Hiccup?"

The boy sighed and looked back down at Toothless, giving the dragon's back an affectionate stroke. "More often than I would have liked."

Astrid felt heat creep up the back of her neck. She felt ashamed, she realized. "I never knew. When we were kids, I mean. I never realizedâ€|"

"â€| Dad can be stubborn, yeah." Hiccup admitted carefully. Toothless' tail snaked protectively around Hiccup's back, and they both heard the dragon coo softly.

"How did you live with that for fourteen years?"

"Iâ€|" he shifted uncomfortably, "Astrid, look, I've got to see him again today, and it's going to be hard enough without all of that baggage."

"Sorry."

"What did you argue about?"

She hesitated, not sure how the young man would take the news. "Wellâ€| Stoick said that Fishlegs told him to build your war machines for another attack on the nest."

Hiccup brightened immediately. "Yes. It was my idea."

"_What?_ But those war machines, they—" she glanced at Toothless and leaned in conspiratorially. "They kill dragons."

"I know." Hiccup sat back and sniffed. He raised his hands to rub his nose, then realized they were still covered in fish oil. He pulled out a cloth and tried to wipe off what he could. "My dad liked the idea?"

"Loved it."

"Good." Hiccup said, his voice thick with satisfaction.

Astrid frowned, confused. "Why in Hel's name would you tell him to build war machines? Aren't you trying to stop it all? That's the point, right?"

"Gobber's never been able to make an invention of mine work."

"He made your wood mill work."

As he always seemed to when he spoke with any energy, Hiccup waved his arms, gesturing furiously. "The mill was simple. Just a couple of big gears. The real change was housing it all in a dragon-proof building. My war machines have complex mechanisms. Dad will pour lots of time and money and materials and effort into building dozens of them, and then they'll crash and break, and he'll look like a fool in front of the entire village."

Astrid stared in disbelief. "You're gambling."

"Am not. The only designs Gobber's actually managed to build are the prototypes I helped him with!" Hiccup's smile faltered, and his arms dropped to his sides. "I don't like undermining my dad, but I have to."

Unable to keep it in any longer, she blurted out, "He wants to kill you."

Hiccup froze for a moment, processing the statement. Then he shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first time. Have you ever woken him up while he's sleeping at the table? Take all sharp objects away first." His words were confident, but she saw how the colour had drained from his cheeks.

"I asked Gothi to stop him."

Hiccup nodded silently, staring at the ground.

"Everything will be fine," she added.

"You should get going, Astrid. I'll arrive on Berk when the sun's at its peak. Be ready."

"You too."

* * *

><p>All of Berk was gathered in the town square. Hundreds upon hundreds of faces, bearded and otherwise, all turned skyward. Most of them were armed. Astrid could hear the worried whispers which rippled through the crowd.</p>

"I heard he rides the beast like a horse." "I heard he's half-man,

half-dragon." "I heard he can fly." "I heard he breathes fire." Such rumors had been circulating constantly since they had come back from the nest. Tales aplenty had been told of the mysterious rider, who had harnessed the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Everyone was eager to see him up close.

Stoick was standing with Fishlegs and Snotlout on the path leading up to the great hall. Astrid stood with her family down near Gobber's forge. Her mother Brunhilda, of course, noticed the choice, and the chilly gulf between Astrid and Stoick, each of whom every so often shot cold glances across the crowd at one another.

Brunhilda gave her daughter a curious look, but Astrid shook her head. Other intelligent Vikings in the crowd had caught the symbolic significance of the distance between Stoick and his heir, including Gobber, and Spitelout who was watching them with insidious eyes.

Time passed, clouds slowly drifting by. A few in the crowd decided to get on with it, and continued with their day.

"Where is he?" One Viking asked. "We've been out here for half an hour! This is outrageous!"

"Don't worry," said Bucket, the tall man giving him a comforting pat on the shoulder. "He's up there."

"How do you know that, Bucket?" Mulch asked, giving his enormous friend a curious look.

Bucket shrugged and stared blissfully up into the heavens. "Dunno. I just do."

It was the children who first spotted the black speck in the sky, hovering near the leeward side of a plump cloud formation. Their pointing fingers and excited whispers were ignored at first, as children often were. Yet a few people in the crowd picked up on it and soon everyone was watching the black speck as it circled closer and closer, eventually close enough that they could make out demonic black wings and hear the faint whistle of the night fury's flight.

"He's here! He's here!" the lookouts cried. Across the crowd, Stoick tensed, his eyes narrowing as he watched the descending shape.

"Is he going to land here? Right in the middle of town?" a blond, bearded Viking asked incredulously.

"We'll chop his beastie up if he does!" another answered, gripping his sword.

Astrid's gaze lingered beyond the edges of the crowd. She could see, in the alleyways, Jorgenson warriors crouched with bows and arrows at the ready. That was it, then. Stoick was going through with his plan anyway. She searched for Gothi's profile, but the Shaman was much shorter than most Vikings, and there was no way to know where she was. Astrid played with the idea of going after Stoick's waiting warriors herself, but there was no way that would turn out well for her, or her family.

"What does he look like up close, Astrid?" Brunhilda asked curiously, leaning across to her. "I've never seen a night fury up close before."

"It's smaller than I had expected."

"I'm surprised he hasn't attacked us yet," Haldor Hofferson commented. "We're all bunched up. A perfect target for a Night Fury's fire."

"He doesn't want to attack us." Astrid told him.

"And you'd know that because?"

"Because he told me," she said bluntly.

The crowd cried out in sudden alarm as the night fury dove towards them, dropping out of the sky at an incredible speed, producing that whistling noise so hated and feared across the archipelago. The warriors in the crowd ran for weapons. Other fled to the shelter of their homes. Within a few seconds the square had all but cleared. Astrid and her family were there, along with a few of the braver warriors and one or two curious civilian. Everyone else was watching from sheltered doorways.

About fifty meters above their heads, the beast levelled out and slowed to a near halt. The dragon rider waved, leaning over his dragon's flank. A few seconds later he leapt off the dragon's back. The Berkians gasped in astonishment as the rider dropped towards them. It looked for a moment as if he was going to crash into the ground, but at the last second, a mere ten meters from the dirt, he flung his arms out, exposing a pair of leathery brown wings. The movement brought him into a steady glide, and he slid to a spotless halt in front of Stoick's entourage, showering them in a wave of dirt as his feet dug trenches in the packed soil. The Vikings around him backed away immediately, gaping at the figure. Stoick held his ground, glaring through the slits in the rider's helmet. Berk's chieftain brushed a clump of dirt from his clothes and scowled down at the visitor.

For many in the crowd, this only confirmed rumors that the phantom was some kind of half-breed abomination or a shape shifter able to switch at will between man and beast, yet as they pushed their way back towards the figure, they saw that his wings were in fact mere leather sheets which the apparition was folding back into his strange brown armour.

Stoick drew his axe as he approached, and the rider took a step back. He was still half a head shorter than Stoick, and next to the three-dozen husky Vikings surrounding him, he looked very spindly. Tall, but all elbows and knees and long, long legs. He asked, "Are you the chief?"

"I am Stoick the Vast of the Haddock clan, Chieftain of Berk. Who are you?"

"Prometheus," The rider replied.

"Prometheus?" Stoick sounded the name out, chewing it like a sour lemon. "What business does a man have riding a dragon?"

But the visitor's attentions were elsewhere. He had turned on his heel, and was examining Berk. His gaze lingered on Gobber's smithy, and the defensive towers, which clearly displayed the net traps designed and built by a younger Hiccup Haddock. As he took it all in, his gaze rested momentarily on Astrid, who had shoved her way to the front of the crowd, and Gobber, who had followed in her wake. He was giving the visitor an equally sharp examination.

"Nice village you have here, chief. A little ah-ha! Burnt." This statement was true; repairs from the last raid had hardly begun. The Hrolfson homestead was a charred empty lot.

"We have beasts like yours to thank for that. Dragons are not welcome here, Prometheus. Neither are those who ally with them."

Astrid shot Stoick a forceful glare, which he returned in full.

"I'm glad that's going so well for you," Prometheus responded evenly. Astrid stifled a groan, watching Stoick's eyes narrow. This wasn't how the meeting was supposed to go.

"You should take better care where your fleet wanders, chief," the rider told him confidently. Above them, the dragon circled in a slow, arc.

"We had it handled," Stoick declared confidently. His entourage of Jorgenson allies all nodded in agreement, including Fishlegs. Every other warrior who had seen the beast gave their chief doubtful looks.

"Nearly," The rider agreed. "Whose idea was it to hang Eels from the rigging?"

All eyes fell on Astrid, and she slowly raised her hand. "It was mine."

"And hiding the weapons too?"

She nodded.

"That was clever." The stranger congratulated. "I'd never have expected Vikings to make it all the way to the nest. Not unless they were on dragonback. That was a good plan."

Astrid allowed herself a small, prideful smile. More than a few in the crowd gave her an appraising look.

"Didn't work, though." Snotlout reminded them. His bow and notched arrow were pointed at the sky. Astrid shot the man a glare.

Prometheus gave the burly Viking a quick examination. "And who are you?"

"Snotlout Jorgenson, the Dragon's Bane!" The Viking answered, eyeing the beast which rode the winds high above them.

"Wow. And what were you planning to do with that bow and arrow, 'Snotlout'?"

"It's insurance." The Viking answered. "If your monster decides to burn this village, it'll go down with us."

"My dragon is well out of range, but you go ahead and empty all your arrows straight up into the air. There's no way that could possibly go badly for you." the apparition spoke in a snide tone which set everyone's teeth on edge.

Astrid snorted, as did a few others in the crowd. Yet Stoick said, "We don't trust the beasts. Perhaps we should just point our arrows at you instead."

"And piss off my night fury? Great plan, Chief."

Yet Snotlout had responded to Stoick's authority. The bow was now trained on the rider's heart. In the skies high above, the dragon let out an unmistakable warning cry. A guttural howl which sent chills down the spine of every adult Viking in the crowd. Oh yes, they all remembered how destructive night furies could be.

"Put your bow down, Snotlout!" Astrid ordered, taking visible pleasure in her authority. "Do you want to anger the Gods? We owe Prometheus a blood debt."

"Astrid—" Stoick tried to cut her off, but it was too late. The words were out, and the village looked on in shock and confusion. Most warriors would have wilted under Stoick's furious glower, and the clearly angry Jorgensons behind him, but Astrid returned the look in kind.

"He saved me, sir."

"He rides the beasts!"

"Law is law, sir!"

"What's a blood debt?" Prometheus cocked his head to one side. The innocence sounded real, at least.

Stoick shot Astrid a seething look. He said, "It's nothing that applies to you, Dragonfriend!"

The rest of the village looked less sure. They all knew the story: the stranger had stepped in at the last minute, and without his intervention the fleet would be cinders. A debt was a debt. The Gods were mindful of such things. Astrid ignored Stoick and addressed the rider directly. She said, "You saved us. According to Viking law that means we are to grant you a boon."

Prometheus glanced back at Astrid, but the young woman stayed silent, aware that she had overstepped her bounds. The rider said, "I need safe harbor for myself and my dragon. Whenever we need it, for as long as we—"

"Astrid does not have the authority to grant such a request!" Stoick interrupted. "We owe nothing to a dragon's ally."

"No authority? I'm your heir!" Astrid protested.

"I'm still chief!" he roared, silencing her, and the Vikings murmuring throughout the crowd.

"Look elsewhere, dragon-rider." Snotlout added. Most of the village was nodding in agreement.

"Do you want to anger the Gods?" Astrid argued hotly.

Prometheus cut in. "I'll feed myself and all, but I need a place to come in from the cold. I usually rest at the nest but the neighbors are kinda temperamental. Lots of loud noises, bad smells, crunching bones. You know you're in a bad neighborhood when other residents try to eat you if you don't keep the noise down!"

Stoick rounded on him. "You don't have the right to ask for anything from us! You come here, riding that demon's spawn, land on my island, insult my warriors and my village, and then have the stones to ask for a boon?"

A murmur spread through the crowd, the hostility towards Prometheus growing with every second.

"What was wrong with that landing? I thought it was pretty solid." Prometheus said, his voice speeding up as he spoke. Astrid could hear his nervousness. "And dragons aren't demons. But figuring that out takes brains!"

Oh, Hiccup, don't! Astrid begged silently. Fishlegs was wearing a pained expression, and the glance he shared with her said it all:
This is not going to end well!

"you know? The only bits you haven't toned to Herculean perfection?"

Silence fell as every Viking tried to work out what the word Herculean meant, but they all knew the sound of an insult when they heard it. Stoick slowly unclipped his axe, and advanced on the lanky rider. "I think it's about time I parted your tongue from your teeth."

All around the town, warriors emerged, weapons in hand. Prometheus slowly backed away, hands up in a placative gesture. "Whoa, whoa, wait a second. We can talk about this."

"Oh, I am more than done talking, Dragonfriend." Stoick snarled, his face blood red, "You enjoy flying so much perhaps I'll remove your feet and toss you off the cliff!"

At that very moment, the village square echoed with the sound of pattering rain.

Several villagers looked towards the cold blue sky in confusion, but the crowd quickly parted to reveal Gothi, who was shaking her staff to create the noise. Her sudden entrance was just enough of a shock to make Stoick pause, his axe raised and ready to swing. The shaman's old hawk-like eyes narrowed as she surveyed the scene. The crowd shrank from her gaze like children caught red-handed before an angry parent. Stoick's venom-filled glare slowly crossed the crowd to rest on Astrid. He realized she had made good on her threat to appeal to the village's resident Mystic.

Gothi herself was giving the dragon rider a close examination, squinting up at him, taking in his foreign armour, and the black eagle sigil on his pauldrons.

"Wise Gothi—" Astrid began, before the shaman held up a hand to silence her. Gothi's staff moved in the sand between Astrid, Stoick, and Prometheus, drawing three interlocking triangles.

The Valknut. One of the most ancient and powerful of the old runes. It represented the forces of life, and death, and Odin's power over both. It was also a direct appeal to the gods. A beacon, bringing all the eyes of Valhalla down upon their settlement. It was not a symbol scratched lightly, and Gothi's intention was clear: any business conducted was to be done directly under the gaze of Odin's Court. Most of Berk dropped to its knees in honor. Astrid followed them, murmuring a quick prayer. Only Stoick and Prometheus stayed upright, though the Chief's eyes were wide with apprehension. His axe was gone, clipped back on his belt. It was one thing to slay the dragon rider and break a dubious blood debt in front of Astrid Hofferson and a village under his thumb. Quite another to risk it before all the gods.

But Gothi was not done. She traced out two symbols out in the sand: F and C. Ansuz and Kenaz. Elder Futhark, they were called. Ancient runes, each symbol carrying meaning and power. Writing was not all that common on Berk, though warriors were expected to be able to write. Only Fishlegs and a few of the tradesmen used the skill on a daily basis. On the rare occasion they did put their thoughts to paper Berkians didn't dare write in the Elder language. The symbols carried too much power. A newer alphabet was used for daily business. Anyone writing in Elder Futhark was willing to risk calling the gods' direct attentions to Berk. Or they meant to, as Gothi did.

Ansuz was one of Freyja's runes. It represented Odin, law, clarity and truth. Kenaz was the symbol of the beacon, representing knowledge and revelations. With the Valknut, Gothi had drawn the gods' attention. Now she was appealing to them directly, summoning their divine will.

Using the runes, Gothi had invoked an authority she alone possessed, and bound both Astrid and Stoick to the truth, and to the law. All the eyes of Valhalla were upon them. If they lied, broke their sacred oaths, or reneged on obligations, they would do it before Odin, their ancestors and all the heroes of old. It was unlikely that the gods would take kindly to any attempted deception. Especially not Odin, who had sacrificed an eye for knowledge.

Astrid could feel the gods' gaze upon her, and Gothi's eyes bored into her very soul. She felt cold, bowl-knotting fear run down her spine. This was it. This was as far as she could take Fishlegs' plans. Or Hiccup's. Astrid Hofferson would not lie to the gods. She could not. She fell to her knees, prostrating herself before the kingdom of Asgard, and the Gothi: The chosen conduit for its might and power in Midgard.

If the shaman asked whose face was under Prometheus' helmet, Astrid would have to tell her, or lose all honor before Berk and the gods. And if Prometheus were unmasked right at that moment, all of their plans would come undone. So she prayed silently for Odin's mercy and

discretion.

The Gods answered her prayers when Gothi's staff swung over to point at Stoick the Vast. Gothi planted it in the ground and wrote the word: _Speak_.

"Gothi," the chief said, "Young Astrid claims that thisâ€| strangerâ€| this foreigner, is owed a Blood Debt. We owe our enemies nothing. This man rides the beasts who steal our food, burn our homes, and murder our children. Those who make their homes with our enemies are our enemies. No blood debt is owed." Murmurs of agreement echoed throughout the crowd.

The staff swung toward Astrid and she knew Gothi wished her to speak. Sure enough, the runes were carved deep into the dry dirt.

Astrid said, "Wise Gothi, with Stoick I led the attack on the nest. I watched it open. I watched one of Loki's children, a giant dragon the size of an island, emerge from the black mountain to do battle with us. We were outmatched. Prometheus and his dragon saved my life. They saved all of us. A blood debt is owed by this village." This claim was greeted with an uneasy silence.

"Astrid was carried from the fight by a deadly nadder," Stoick said, "She saw nothing!"

"Prometheus saved me, and there are plenty of other witnesses. He saved us all," Astrid shot back, stung that her chief questioned her honesty so quickly.

The old shaman's face remained impassive as she considered both perspectives. She turned back to Stoick and tapped Ansuz, the rune of truth. The demand was clear, and the Viking chief deflated.

"He and his dragon fought with Loki's hel-spawn. He bought us time to escape. But we don't know why. He rides a dragon, and we're right not to trust him!"

"It was the right thing to do!" Prometheus blurted out, before Gothi held up a hand to silence him. She turned back to Stoick and carved another message into the dirt, deep enough for all of Berk to read.

He saved you. A debt is owed.

With that, Gothi turned back towards her home on the cliff's edge, and shuffled away, leaning on her staff for support. Stoick's nostrils flared in anger, and he snorted like a bull. He took a few steps after her, nearly treading on the sacred runes. "Gothi!" he bellowed, "Gothi, we are enemies of the dragons. This man is not. They murder our children! They murdered my son! How can we be allies? Gothi? Gothi!"

Yet the shaman ignored him and disappeared off towards her home.

Stoick growled in frustration and turned away, staring down at the runes and breathing heavily. He confronted Astrid, face twisting in rage. "_You! _You're not welcome in my hall, and you're not worthy of my name!" Astrid's breath hitched, and she looked at the ground,

feeling nausea wash over her at the public humiliation.

"The Blood Debt will stand." Stoick called out, addressing the village at large. He turned back to the rider, "As you asked, you may rest here. Repair what tools you need."

"Not in my forge he won't." Gobber added, to the crowd's approval. Prometheus flinched.

"I'm not finished!" Stoick barked. "You're a foreign dog, and we don't want you here. You keep your beast away from us. You sleep in the kill ring with your true kin, and you treat every single one of my people with the utmost respect." This last proclamation was met with a cheer. "Break any of these rules and I'll kill you, dragon rider. I will beat you. I will cut you. I will bleed you dry. You and your hel-spawn. Blood Debt or no."

"Sounds fair. Very fair. Thank you, sir." Prometheus bowed before Berk's Chieftain. His voice was faint and weak. Fishlegs, standing at Stoick's side, made a disgusted noise and turned away from the dragon rider. Snotlout, Spitelout, and the other Jorgensons followed suit, heading up the hill after Stoick. Astrid felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise, and she scanned the crowd.

Many of them were glaring at her. Almost all, in fact. Even the Barrasons and the Finnasons, the Hofferson Clan's closest allies. Her sisters and cousins among them, married into the allied clans, had turned their faces away from her in shame. Astrid was so utterly gods-damned tired of Berk's judgmental stares! Only her mother and father stood by her. Gobber was watching her too, making an effort to look friendly, though Astrid knew his smile was in honor of young Hiccup's memory more than any goodwill the blacksmith actually held towards her. She was grateful for it, even so.

She glared at them all, red-faced, but unwilling to shrink from her village's disgust. She turned back to 'Prometheus' as Hiccup called himself, and crossed her arms.

"Thank you, fair maiden, for your generosity," He said meekly, voice muffled beneath the helmet.

"The laws carved on Gungnir demanded it," Astrid said, addressing the thinning crowd more than the rider.

"Even soâ€|"

Astrid felt a strong hand on her shoulder, and Haldor Hofferson stepped up beside her. "Best you leave, Dragonfriend. Before you cause us more trouble."

Beneath his mask, Hiccup's piercing green eyes darted between Astrid and her father. The few villagers left in the square were giving him hateful glares. A few spat at him as they passed by. Astrid envied him his anonymity. At least the helmet covering his face gave him some measure of protection. With his false identity he could wander anywhere, but Astrid Hofferson would forever be remembered as the woman who not only failed to kill a Dragonfriend, but argued against her chief to let one stay on the island.

A glum depression engulfed her as she realized in saving Hiccup she

had lost the entire village's respect. That hole was dug so deep she could see no way out. The dream of changing Berk seemed wholly and entirely out of reach.

Hiccup seemed taken by the same lethargy. His shoulders drooped as he meandered silently down to the blacksmith's shop, and stepped off the edge of the cliff. A moment later he rose back into view, riding his Night Fury, and the two of them vanished into the horizon with a faint but thunderous crack.

* * *

><p>The three conspirators met again that evening. Astrid and Fishlegs arrived at nearly the same time. Toothless was curled up on the grass with Hiccup in the middle, looking lost and forlorn. The young man had wrapped a bear fur around himself. He was shaking and pale-faced, his concentration centered on an ornate golden disc he held in his palm. The object looked almost magical in nature. It had strange writings around the edges, and lots of moving parts in the middle. Hiccup was staring down at it as if it would yield answers to all of his questions.</p>

Her curiosity outstripped her sympathy, and Astrid opened her mouth to ask him about it, but Fishlegs tore into him first. "What happened? You had all the cards in your hand, Hiccup! There's a giant monster at the nest that only dragons can kill, the village owed you a blood debtâ€¦ And you were right: that landing was impressive! The village was at your fingertips and you let it all slip away! You gave away all your ground when you could have had Stoick on the run! What happened to your Odious' plan?"

"Odysseus." Hiccup corrected numbly, still running his thumb over the golden disc. "Odysseus' plan."

"You had Berk at your fingertips," Fishlegs exclaimed, wringing his hands, "Ooh, Stoick was so mad. This is such a disaster."

"Fishlegs, lay off!" Astrid barked, watching the way Hiccup shrunk from the reprimand, and remembering the way Stoick had kicked her out the night before. Their chieftain was not a gentle man. She couldn't imagine what Hiccup must have felt like, being threatened in such a blunt manner by his own father.

Fishlegs said, "We're not going to take Berk if he can't stand up to Stoick the Vast, Astrid. You know it. I know it."

"Thank you, Fishlegs, for summing that up." Hiccup said hopelessly, pulling his furs a little tighter. The golden disc vanished beneath the thick brown covering.

Astrid glared at Fishlegs. "When was the last time your father threatened to kill you?"

"Doesn't matter. We can't afford to be this emotional. Not if we want to win," Fishlegs shot back. "You and I? We've done our part. All we can. But if Hiccup can't deliverâ€¦"

"Gobber said Stoick shouted Hiccup out of Haddock Hall every second night of his life, Fishlegs. Now he threatened his life! For Eir's sake, show some mercy!"

"Both of you, stop!" Hiccup barked. The other two fell silent, more out of shock than anything else. The gangly youth rose slowly to his feet, shrugging off his furs to tower over them both. In his hand he was still gripping that ornate golden disc. He said, "Fishlegs is right. I wasn't ready to face my dad. I screwed up, and I can't let it happen again." His grip on the golden disc tightened. "Mistakes carry a cost, and this one set us back. We can't afford to make any more of them. Not now."

"Can you face him next time?" Fishlegs asked, his arms crossed.

Hiccup replied with a steady, confident look. Yet his face was still pale. "I'll be ready."

"So what's the next step?" Astrid asked, glancing from one to the other.

"I'll lay low." Hiccup said. "I think everyone on Berk needs a few weeks to calm down. I'll do the occasional flyby. Let them get used to me being aroundâ€|"

"Look for opportunities to help." Fishlegs suggested. "Winter's coming, and we'll be collecting supplies. Food and such. It's a way you can help without actually entering the village, I'll do what I can on the side to smooth things over, and I'll keep an eye on the village's temperament. Let you know when you need to back off, or where you can help more."

"And what about me?" Astrid asked.

"Upholding the Blood Debt was an unpopular move, Astrid. You lost your friends and your popular support defending Prometheus. That's what Hiccup's mistake cost."

"I caught that, thanks." Astrid said dryly and Hiccup looked at the ground in shame.

"People are going to treat you badly."

"I can take it."

"It wouldn't have happened if Hiccup had stood up to Stoick. We'd be in a much better position."

"Fishlegs, don't," Astrid snarled, noting the way Hiccup's face had fallen.

"We're a team, Fishlegs. We can't turn against each other," Hiccup told him.

"I'm not trying to turn anything, I'm just saying," Fishlegs said defiantly, "This could have gone far better."

"Fishlegs, can I have a private word?" Astrid gave Hiccup a pointed look.

"Ohâ€| brilliant," He muttered, "Justâ€| try not to kill each other please. It would just give my dad another excuseâ€|" With that he

turned and tromped back to Toothless, who was lounging on a patch of grass.

Astrid turned on Fishlegs. Her voice was soft but fierce. "What in Hel's realm are you doing?"

"Pointing out the truth."

"More than that. You're up to something. You always are. Do you want this plan to work?"

"Of course."

"Then stop toying around! This isn't a board game, Fishlegs. When Stoick said he'd kill Hiccup, he wasn't lying."

They both looked at the auburn-haired rider. Hiccup had once again pulled out the golden disc. He was adjusting mechanisms on it, occasionally glancing up at the sky absentmindedly.

"This is serious." Astrid finished.

"Did you know even after all this time he still cares about you?"

"Who?" Astrid asked blankly.

Fishlegs nodded towards Hiccup. "He's still in love. Or whatever that was."

Astrid felt heat rush into her cheeks. "Iâ€¦ what? Why is that? What does that mean?" Really? He did? After eight years? It sounded sand and pathetic when she thought of him as the fourteen-year-old talking fishbone. But when she glanced back at the leather-clad rider with his long, long legs and auburn maneâ€¦

She realized Fishlegs was smirking, and she glared at him. "Thatâ€¦ doesn't matter right now."

"It's relevant because if he thinks his actions hurt you, it might motivate him to do better next time. And he needs to do better. I'm not trying to split this group up, Astrid. I'm playing to win."

She glared at him in disgust. "Does your wife know what she married?"

Fishlegs rocked back as if slapped. His mouth hung open, and his face carried a look of shock which Astrid found deeply, viscerally satisfying. She grinned at him, even as he swallowed a retort. Hiccup was approaching, his feet slipping and crunching on the loose pebbles of the shoreline. "Everyone still breathing?"

Astrid nodded, trying to avoid Hiccup's searching gaze. Eight yearsâ€¦ Fishlegs voice echoed eight yearsâ€¦ "I was just wondering if instead of laying blame, Fishlegs could do something about the state of things."

Fishlegs shook his head, still smarting from her well-placed barb. "You're unpopular now but this will get worse. We only have one card to play, and I'm saving it."

"What for?" she demanded angrily.

"For when you start riding dragons." Fishlegs explained with patronizing patience. "They're going to think you've gone right around the bend."

"Wait, Card? What card?" Hiccup glanced between them.

"The moment Stoick declared Astrid his heir, the Jorgensons forced her into a marriage deal with Snotlout." Fishlegs told him.

Astrid stared at the soggy ground, her face red with shame, and glowering with anger.

"Oh, Thorâ€œ! Hiccup's fingers leapt into his hair, and combed through repeatedly. An action her eyes couldn't help but follow.
"Astrid, I'm so, so s—"

"Don't you dare pity me!" She snapped, jabbing her finger into Hiccup's chest.

He raised both hands, the golden disc glinting in the sunlight.
"Whoa, I wouldn't- I wasn't- I would never!"

"The Jorgensons bully everyone, Hiccup, and Snotlout is very unpopular," Fishlegs explained. "He's got a big mouth, but he's not actually very good at what he does."

"Really? I'm stunned."

Fishlegs rolled his eyes. "No one wants him to lead. I might be able to play that enmity in Astrid's favor."

"Then do it." Hiccup said.

"When the time is rightâ€œ!" Fishlegs replied.

Astrid growled in frustration and turned away. "I am so tired of all these lies."

"It's necessary," Fishlegs told her.

"Things'll get better." Hiccup added, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "The moment everyone realizes how great dragons really are, everything will be better."

"We just have to survive and gather support until the balance tips," Fishlegs said. "Until that happens, Astrid, you're going to have to bear the village's scorn."

* * *

><p>Howdy dudes and dudettes!

I've been out of it for quite a while. Suffice it to say that employment and other adult life problems added stress. Stress killed the muse. Now at least some of those problems are solved, and the muse came back to life. Here I am, ready to rumble!

The last scene was written with input from Midoriko-Sama, and I'd like to thank her for the help and support she's given.

**The Valknut is an interesting rune. It was around apparently as early as the eighth century. The word Valknut itself is a modern word. No one seems to know what the Vikings of the era called that symbol. No one knows exactly what it means, either. So please keep in mind I might well be abusing it here. The best information I was able to find was that it is associated with Odin and his binding powers over life and death. It appears quite often on ancient Norse grave sites. Even in the best light, that's vague. Still, not the kind of symbol you'd scratch idly. It sounds quite threatening, in point of fact. So I used it that way. **

**I know I keep on saying this, but I'll say it again. Fishlegs is OOC intentionally because his character as its written is the comic relief for little kids who watch the show. This story is not written with that same audience in mind, and I needed to give him an edge.
**

31. Chapter 31

Prodigal Son 31

Astrid had to navigate the last half-mile back to Berk by memory and the light of the half-moon. After she emerged from the woods just east of the great hall she stood at the edge of the pastures, staring down at the shadowy village ahead. It had never looked less welcoming. A question occurred to her that she hadn't given much thought to: Where would she sleep tonight?

Her parents would let her back into their hall, she knew, but it wasn't an option. With her reputation so low, Astrid wanted to put as much distance between herself and the Hofferson clan as possible. Contact would be toxic, and there was no reason to drag the rest of her family into this insanity

A cold bench in the great hall would perhaps work for a night or two, but she knew that all through the night and every morning Vikings would pour in and give her those looks of compassionless judgement. Sleeping on a bench would only solidify her new identity as a reject and a vagrant.

Gods aboveâ€| more than anything else, Astrid just craved stability. Protect village during a dragon raid? Reputation up. Help Stoick conduct a raid on the nest? Reputation down. Get shipwrecked and miraculously find one's way home? Reputation up. Get accused of theft? Reputation down. Reason for theft: long lost love? Reputation up, and the chief's favor. Try for another attempt at the nest? Reputation down. _Actually make it?_ Reputation up. Can't fight the monster? Reputation down. Found someone who could? Reputation upâ€| until everyone realizes that his method is unorthodoxâ€| then down again.

All that within a few weeks. Perhaps there was something to Hiccup's decision to simply up and leave. The more twisted Astrid got in Berk's politics, the more insane the island looked. She did not really want to spend her time around people who were so bloody temperamental.

She pondered for a moment simply vanishing back into the woods and spending the night with Stormfly. That would only make things worse. People would say she had spent the night with him with _Him_. Because of course they would.

Eight Yearsâ€| -no! Nope. Nope nope nope.

Anyways, what had happened to Viking loyalty? Wasn't that supposed to be something that mattered? Not on Berk. People were only loyal until it became inconvenient for them. Couldn't they see that in everything she had done, every decision she had made, she was only trying to help? Only trying to solve the problem which had plagued them for centuriesâ€|?

Where to sleep? Once again, the light of the smithy shone like a beacon. Astrid stumbled despondently towards it, sticking close to the shadows, and actively avoiding the fellow villagers she passed along the way, her determination to evade them often forcing her into long circuitous routes through the town.

She finally stepped into the light of Gobber's forge. The smith had his back turned, and he was hammering away at a long, red-hot piece of steel which Astrid recognized as a half-finished sword. He pushed it back into the hot coals, and pumped the bellows a few times, then turned towards her, wiping his brow. The smith gave a start as he caught sight of her, then he sighed. "Oh, it's you. Wha' do yeh want, then?"

"Can I stay here, Gobber?"

"No." The blacksmith turned back to his forge.

Astrid stared, genuinely shocked at the burly old Viking's curt dismissal. "â€|Please?"

"No."

"I need somewhere to sleep."

"Try Sven's barn, you traitor."

Astrid flinched at the insult. "Traitor? You're the one who told me to go to Gothi!"

"Look, he saved yer life an' so yeh didn' want' im dead. Fair enough. And I know Stoick can be a righ' arsehead, bu' I didn' know you were going ta' go and give that crazy fool a boon!"

Astrid needed his help too much to argue. She tried to figure out a way forward, but conversation wasn't really her forte. What would Fishlegs do? Play the villagers off against one another for his own interests. What were Gobber's issues? He didn't get along with Stoick. She knew that much. Gods, this was a bad idea. She said, "Stoick doesn't like me any more than you do."

"And?"

"And I doubt he'd be happy with you if you'd let me say here."

Gobber's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and she knew her gambit had failed. So much for Fishlegs' methods. Apparently they only worked for Fishlegs.

"What are yeh up to?" The smith asked suspiciously. "Never mind. I don't want ta know. As fer Stoick, can't say I blame him. Actually I'm relieved that after all this time he and I finally agree on something again. Neither of us want that crazy man or his Godsâ€"forsaken dragon anywhere near Berk. You went and handed him a fancy invitation." His voice went shrill and witless. "Oh sure mister dragon rider here yeh go! Have a nap in the village square! Go get a meal in the Great Hall and take yer monster with yeh, why don't yeh? I'm sure he won't eat any of the kidsâ€!"

"It hasn't eaten him," Astrid shot back, her fists itching. "It lets him ride it around!"

"Yeh can't train dragons, Astrid. Anyone who thinks tha' needs ta get some sense knocked into 'em."

"You've tried?"

The smith waved his stump. "Ridin'em? No. But do yeh think I lost an arm and a leg pickin' daisies? Anyone who thinks those beasts are anything but feral monsters is crazy. "

"The rider saved us! He hasn't done anything to threaten us!"

"Yetâ€|" Gobber grabbed the cold end of his sword blade and shifted it in the coals. He turned back and shook his head. "Just yeh wait. Just yeh bloody wait."

"I know what I'm doing, Gobber!"

"Ha! Sure yeh do."

Astrid's blood boiled over. "The rider's killed less children than you, you know."

Gobber halted and turned, slowly rotating as if propelled by hidden motors. He squared his shoulders, mouth twisting into a horrible scowl. "Yeh want ta say tha' again, lass?" With his one good hand, he reached underneath his workbench and produced an axe, which glinted in the light of the forge. "I'm no' sure I heard yeh the first time."

"Brynjolf was Snotlout's responsibility. You want to call me stupid? No kids died in the ring. Not on my watch. Sluglout died on yours."

"I seeâ€|" Gobber said slowly, rage building behind whatever paper-thin mental dam he had constructed. He laid one large hand on the axe handle. "Yeh'd best walk away, lass, before I cut yeh down ta size. Yer nae welcome here."

Astrid's eyes fell on Hiccup's broken grinder in the shop behind him. Gobber had tried to repair it again, with no success. A new tactic occurred to her. It was manipulative, and horrible, but it felt _so

damned good_ to say. "What would Hiccup say if he saw you turning me away when I needed help?"

The smith froze. His face had turned bright red, and his mouth was twisted in a snarl, made all the more menacing for his scars and stone tooth.

"Yehâ€|yeh can'tâ€| Don't yeh dare-" he sputtered.

"What would he say, Gobber?"

She strode past the furious Viking, stepping into his spare room and turned, taking a seat on the bed, daring him to kick her out.

â€|But he didn't. Instead he stood in his shop, glaring at her. "Yer Hel's whore, Astrid Hofferson!" he spat, "I don't know wha' he ever saw in yeh."

"You have no idea what Hiccup Haddock saw when he looked at the world! No one did," she shot back defiantly. Her right hand snuck around to her axe, expecting violence from the blacksmith, but he just looked shocked. So she stood up and dropped the curtain between them, giving herself a little privacy. This was low, she knew. Using the blacksmith's love of Hiccup against him, but she didn't feel like she had much choice.

All of a sudden, she heard Gobber's enraged yell:

"It coulda bin tha' dragon, Astrid! There was a Night Fury around back then! It coulda bin the dragon tha' killed'im! It coulda bin tha' one!"

Astrid stayed silent, biting her tongue as hard as she could. On the other side of the curtain she heard the blacksmith roar. Wood splintered as he planted the axe into something breakable. After that there was silence. A few hours later the stairs creaked as the old blacksmith found his way to bed.

* * *

><p>Astrid awoke with a start, feeling a miserable knot in her gut. Once again, pre-dawn light was shining through cracks in the smithy's back wall. Yet that waxing sunlight failed to lift her spirits. Above her head, Gobber was still asleep. She could hear him snoring.</p>

Astrid was more than a little shocked her gambit to abuse his emotional connection had worked, and she felt all the more guilty for it. Gobber was a good man, she knew. Sluglout's death had hit him hard, and Hiccup's death -for lack of a better term- had hit him harder. She had to remind herself that everything would work out in the end. Hiccup was alive, and the boy owed her! Repairing things with Gobber was one of the many ways she resolved to have him pay back his debt.

She rolled out of bed and yawned, pulling back the curtain and leaving the forge, and her guilt, behind as fast as possible. There was supposed to be dragon training today, thank Thor. That, at least, would not change. She started into her familiar route, stopping household by household.

Though the horizon was pink, the sky above Berk was still cloudy and dark, screening the fading stars. A harsh wind, the first real winter wind pierced her threadbare clothing, wicking away her heat as she stomped across the frost-ridden ground. Hoarfrost had crystallized on the trees, bushes, and buildings, outlining every edge in the village with glittering white crystal. Winter had arrived, she realized. The first snowfall would be in a day or two. Astrid hugged herself to keep warm, and struggled onwards.

Her first stop was at the Ragason farmstead on the border of Berk Village. It was a modest building, belonging to one of the smallest clans on Berk. Yet their child Rangvald was among her most devoted students.

Hefting her axe in one hand, Astrid stepped up to the door and knocked on it three times. Voices echoed from within, but no tiny, helmeted figure appeared.

"Dragon training!" Astrid announced, stomping her feet to keep out the chill. A minute passed, and she slung her axe across her back so she could hug herself closer. She could hear more voices inside, including consternated whispers from Ragnar and Runa, the mother and father, and stifled protests from young Rangvald himself. Something was wrong, she realized. The hairs on the back of her neck rose as she watched the closed doorway, and the shadowy buildings all around her.

Astrid stepped up to the door again and hammered against it as hard as she could. "This is Astrid Hofferson! Is everything alright?"

The door opened a moment later to reveal Runa and Ragnar, the mother and father, both looking extremely put out. Ragnar in particular was giving her a loathsome glower. He said, "Rangvald won't be attending yer class, Hofferson. He's 'unwell."

"'Unwell'?" Astrid repeated slowly. A sinking feeling overtaking her.

"Yes," Runa insisted, following her husband's lead. "Unwell."

The door slammed shut so fast that she rocked back on her heels.

"Mum and dad, I'm fine!" came the child's angry rejoinder from within the small homestead. He was promptly shushed into silence.

Astrid glanced to either side. A woman's face appeared in an open window two doors down. She surveyed Astrid with a look of disgust, right before the shutters slammed closed. The sound echoed across the empty street. Hostile eyes watched her through cracks in each hall. Every family was watching her standing alone in the cold. She felt so very exposed, and isolated.

Smarting from the Ragason's cold dismissal, she moved onto the Hallkelson household, which lay a little further into town. Halldis and Hafgrim were the mother and father. Their twin children Osman and Hallfrid, both eight winters old, were new to Astrid's class. Indeed it had been young Osmand who had shown her Hiccup's sketches and notes in the book of dragons.

She stepped up to the door and hesitated for but a moment before she knocked three times. She stepped back as the door opened, revealing Hafgrim, their stern father. He crossed his arms and stood in the doorway, giving her a haughty look.

"Dragon training," Astrid said shortly.

"They're sick," he replied.

"Bullshit. This is about what happened yesterday. Isn't it?"

Hafgrim opened his mouth, a denial on the tip of his tongue. Then he shrugged nad nodded. "It is. Now get out of here, Astrid. I'll have my children raised the Viking way."

Astrid huffed in disbelief, her worst fears confirmed. Please no, Odin, Thorâ€| don't take this from me! Anything but the teaching!

"Just a week ago, you were so glad that Stoick made me his heirâ€|" She hated how pathetic she sounded, but it was true. The Hallkelsons had been furious with Snotlout for the risks he took with their children's lives. They had always gotten along well with Astrid's family. Hafgrim himself had chopped wood for her mother, and Halldis' paid Astrid's lessons in delicious baked pies delivered to the Hofferson door once a week.

"That was before yeh gave a Dragonfriend a free pass to wander Berk."

Astrid's fists curled. "A debt was owed!"

"And it's that bloody simple, is it?" He demanded. "Letting a dragon into the village? Honor yer debts. Never mind my kids? Next time yeh need ta fuckin' think. Yer not fit ta be chief!"

"Iâ€| youâ€| you can't justâ€|" she spluttered. He turned around and slammed the door. Astrid hung her head, her breath freezing in her lungs. She felt ready to weep. She could hear the whispered conversations behind closed doors all around her.

Still clinging to faint hope, Astrid moved on to the next house, which was a few properties towards the central square. She paused outside the Hallason door, hand raised. She could hear feet creaking on the other side of the thin wooden panel. All along the empty street, Berk was silent, watching her with cruel, unforgiving eyes.

Astrid lowered her hand and stepped down from the stoop. A strange lethargy swallowed her, and she couldn't quite help dragging her feet as she made her way down the center of the unsteady road, heading in no direction in particular.

So that was it, then. After a full decade of loyal service, after braving every attack, weathering every storm, after killing and hunting and fighting and teaching alongside her fellow villagersâ€| Berk just shut her out. How could one mistake take so much away from her? Did she really mean so little to them?

She wondered what her old uncle Finn would have said, then shut out his memory. It was too painful for her at that moment. She felt as if she had fallen down to the bottom of a hole. As if she were being smothered by her own stress, pushed out of her own mind, being compressed into a smaller and smaller space, locked in by other people, almost maliciously forced to suffer there alone in that emotional hell.

Feet trampled the ground behind her and she turned, expecting an attacker. This village was capable of anything.

It was Fridleif Finnason. The young man who had been wounded during Snotlout's training session. He was panting, and moving gingerly. His broken ribs were clearly still causing him pain, and would continue to do so for some time to come.

"Ma'am! Ma'am!" He scrambled to a halt and stood stiffly in front of her.

The wind bit at them as they stood there, eyeing one another.

"What?" she asked sourly.

"Dragon training," he answered, his voice chipper.

Astrid stared. "Fridleif, there is no dragon training." It hurt _so much _to say that.

He stared back, uncomprehendingly.

"You saw what happened yesterday. The village hates me now." Astrid explained.

"I don't care. I'm ready to train."

The halls around them creaked. The families were watching and listening, she knew.

"There's loyalty, and then there's stupidity." Astrid hissed fiercely. "You're risking your reputation, Fridleif."

"Your training saved my life." he said shortly. "I don't care about reputation!"

Astrid's world seemed to light up, color seeping into what had been bleak, depressing grey. Not everyone thought she was a traitor. Her students, at least, were loyal! Godsâ€| she wanted to embrace him. To laugh, to jump for joy, but she had sunk so deeply into that lonely, desolate emotional pit that she could barely manage a smile.

Then she heard the whispering. Tittering and hissing gossip behind the plank walls and closed doors all around them. The stupid idiot was going to ruin himself, she realized, all of her elation draining out, leaving behind a weak emptiness. She was toxic. Her mere presence, her company, was toxic. But she could still save him. The last person in the entire godsdamned village who understood what loyalty meant.

She said, "You were wounded saving Hallfrid and Osmand during

Snotlout's training session, yes?"

"If you call that training." Fridleif shot back, with all the cockiness of youth.

Astrid frowned at him. "That Gronckle hit you hard. Have your ribs healed?"

"Healed enough."

"Really?" She pressed two fingers into his side, applying only a small amount of pressure. The color drained from Fridleif's face, and he gasped, falling to his knees.

"A warrior should know when he's fit for battle and rest when he's not," Astrid told the kneeling youth. "There's your lesson for the day."

Trying desperately to ignore the look of betrayal on his face, she turned away and trudged back through the village. She passed by her own home, and Stoick's Hall, though she could look at neither of them. Her stomach felt uncomfortably empty, and the cold was eating away at her, so she wound her way toward the Great Hall, that enormous door set into the cliff itself, towering over all of Berk. It too was covered in a layer of frost, making it appear an ethereal portal, leading to Niflheim, perhaps. Home of the ice giants.

She trudged up the steps and pushed the massive doors open. Warm air engulfed her, and she heard the comforting hum of cheerful conversation, as she had a thousand times before. Yet the moment she stepped inside, all talking ceased. The room went still with an uncomfortable silence. Vikings looked up from their tables, watching her. Their expressions ranged from disinterest to distaste to disgust. Fishlegs was there too, sitting with Ruffnut and her brother. He was nursing a small bundle with tiny, tiny waving hands. He spared her barely a glance. He couldn't do any more, of course. Astrid had spent enough time with the man to understand how he operated, and what his plan was, but his coldness hurt nonetheless.

She raised her head up proudly and brushed through the tables, dodging a few legs which Viking warriors, most of them Jorgenson, conveniently left in the aisles for her to trip over. The lunch line was fairly short, and as Astrid entered she gave the older woman in front of her a nod. The Thorston matron responded with a glum, closed look, and turned away.

Astrid sighed and held her tongue. All around the hall, quiet conversation resumed. Perhaps it was paranoia at this point, but Astrid could well guess what they were all whispering to one another.

The line moved slowly, and at last she found herself standing in front of Iona the cook, who had greeted her with a smile every morning for years. She was always willing to talk. Yet today the young woman kept her eyes down, and carefully ladled Astrid a modest helping of stew into a wooden bowl.

"Hello Iona."

The cook ignored her greeting and carefully slid a piping hot bowl of stew across the counter, though an embarrassed blush filled her cheeks.

"How is Styr?" Astrid tried again.

Iona swallowed stiffly, but kept her eyes down. Astrid could feel the eyes of the surrounding Vikings on the back of her neck. Those standing behind her in the lunch line stamped their feet and huffed impatiently.

"You too, huh?" Astrid asked.

"I'm sorry," the young woman whispered, plopping her ladle back into the hot stew pot.

Astrid stood in silence for a moment, watching the young cook's face go red. Finally out of patience with the entire damned village, she swept her arm across the counter, making Iona flinch, and tossing the bowl onto the floor. Stew landed in a dirty arc across the carefully laden cobbles, and the wooden bowl clattered loudly as it landed, rolling to a halt by the nearest table.

The hall once again fell silent as every Viking looked up to see what the commotion was. Astrid glared at Iona, who had turned a shade of bright red, but finally met her eye with an apologetic look. Without saying a word, Astrid turned on her heel and stomped out. Meeting every hostile look with a matching, murderous glare of her own.

The hall's enormous door slammed shut behind Astrid, and she stood at the top of the stairs, taking in the entirety of her home village. She could see Gobber's forge across the town. The smith was outside, angrily turning his spare bed into kindling, sending a clear message to her, and everyone else in the town.

Astrid's angry breath crystallized in the air before her. At that moment, she couldn't stand the sight of Berk. Every shadow now held menace. Every darkened doorway was an insult. Even the whistling wind was a malevolent force, crushing her humanity.

At that moment, she desperately wanted to see Hiccup and Stormfly. Her dragon was a safe companion, free of judgment. And she hoped- she knew that Hiccup's sarcastic humor would draw something out of her, help her unlock her own mind and allow those burdens to come pouring out. She would have room to breathe again. She set off into the forest at a jogging pace, partly to keep warm, and partly to speed up her escape.

* * *

><p>At the Cove, Hiccup was nowhere to be seen, but Stormfly greeted Astrid with enthusiasm, and confusion. The nadder chirped and flapped around her, sniffing at her clothing. Astrid managed a smile, quite a feat after her rage-fuelled march through the wilderness.</p>

"I'm sorry girl. I didn't bring any fish today."

The dragon rumbled in disappointment, but nuzzled her closer, sensing Astrid's distress. Astrid wrapped her arms around Stormfly and stood there for a second, thankful for the dragon's warmth and

companionship. Stormfly crooned and wrapped herself around her, raising her wings to shield her underdressed rider from the elements.

Hiccup and Fishlegs had turned the Cove back into a proper campsite. They had blankets, skins, and a proper firepit. Astrid retrieved a thick sheepskin coat from their supplies, and mounted Stormfly, shutting her eyes as she felt the dragon's powerful legs launch them both high into the air. She relished the way she was pressed her back into her seat, and the rush of the wings beating on either side. She could already feel her mind clearing, her problems melting away before the miracle of flight.

They flew for an hour or more, whipping through the seastacks and racing down the mountainside. Eventually they landed on the far end of the island. Before flight, the trip would have taken several days on foot. Now? Twenty minutes on dragonback.

Astrid leapt from Stormfly's back and shucked her sheepskin coat. Even wearing it, the flight had been bitingly cold. Astrid had dealt with cold her entire life. There was no better way to warm up than movement, and she felt ready to train. She started with stretches, making sure she was limber enough to move without damaging her muscles. It was one of the first things Fearless Finn had taught her. Plenty of Vikings practiced with weapons, and worked out but few of them stretched beforehand, preparing their bodies properly to make the most of their training regimen.

After she had finished her stretches, she hefted her axe and shield across her back and started jogging across the uneven terrain, running along roots and hopping from rock to rock to practice her balance and coordination. Stormfly followed, chirping in confusion; her rider was moving as if they were under threat, but the dragon couldn't smell anything or anyone around them.

Astrid launched her axe into a nearby tree, aiming for a knot, which she hit dead-on. Stormfly let out a high-pitched trill in triumph, having finally found their enemy, and sent a hail of tailspines at the trunk.

Astrid froze, staring at the peppered bark. Too many times, she had seen those same spines flying at Berk's shield walls, at her comrades, at her studentsâ€œ the poison tipped darts were among the most deadly things in the dragons' arsenal. True, Nadders had the hottest flame, and true, Night Furies aside, they were the fastest dragon, but both of those were manageable.

Young Vikings could be taught how to deal with quick opponents, and how to avoid getting burned on approach, but the spines were unpredictable. Astrid had seen Nadders fire single shots in precision strikes, slipping through the gaps in shield walls, and she had seen cornered, wounded Nadders fire off every spine in their tail at once, filling the air in every direction with poison-tipped projectiles.

The Viking warrior had to work hard to contain her sudden disgust and anxiety. She shut her eyes, gritting her teeth against the flurry of memories, and when Stormfly nuzzled her, she flinched. The dragon let out a worried chirp and backed off, sensing Astrid's hostility.

Astrid regretted the move almost instantly, fear sweeping through her; she did not want to drive the nadder away. Not when she felt like the dragon was her only friend in the world. "I'm sorry girl. I'm sorry!" she stroked Stormfly's scales and laid her head against her snout.

Stormfly responded with a gentle coo, and settled down around Astrid, her warmth providing a comforting balm against the chilly air, feeling colder since she had stopped moving.

"I'm done." It was a spontaneous decision, and a choice she had never actually made before; to leave her workout routine half finished. But her heavy heart seemed to sap her very strength, and her will to work. She had always done it for Berk. She kept herself in shape, practiced with her weapons to defend Berk, to provide a good example for the children she was no longer allowed to teach. Now her loyalty to her town tribe was at an all-time low, the motivation to train was just gone.

She settled under Stormfly's wing, keeping herself warm against the dragon's belly, and wrapping herself in the wool coat she had brought with her. Astrid gently drifted off to sleep in the wilderness, far from her home.

Time passed, but it didn't seem to matter too much. Her thoughts, all as dreary as the grey sky, drifted in and out of one another without beginning or end. There was a strange comfort in her emotionless resignation. Something would happen eventually, she knew, she just couldn't really care less what it was. If night fell, it would find her lying there on her side, with her dragon, having fallen victim to that all-encompassing lethargy. She settled in to wait.

* * *

><p>"Lo, bear witness to the acts of Astrid Hofferson: her enemies laid to waste and driven before her, the air filled with lamentations of her conquered foes, the mighty warrior and her ferocious steed rest their weary limbs and settle downâ€| for Nappy Time."<p>

Astrid cracked an eye and quickly spotted Hiccup Haddock. The lanky young man had settled himself on a nearby log, and was grinning from ear to ear. His messy auburn mane was windswept, tangled, and dark with sweat. Astrid wondered how long he'd been searching for her. Toothless was snuffling around behind him, poking through the mossy undergrowth. Against her back, Stormfly shifted and trilled quietly.

Hiccup slid off his log and landed lightly on the forest floor. "Feeling hungry? Fishlegs mentioned you missed lunch." He was carrying an uncorked flask in one hand, and with the other he was lifting a basket of fish up for Stormfly. Hiccup had carefully wrapped the flask in a layer or two of sheepskin, to help preserve the heat. Now uncorked, a layer of hot vapor rose from its mouth.

Astrid forced herself onto her butt and leaned back against her nadder, who adjusted quickly to her the new position. The shield maiden nodded at his basket. "Stormfly didn't smell you coming?"

"Oh, she did," he told her, "She's been watching me for the last half hour, but you were asleep, so she didn't move."

Astrid felt a sudden burst of fondness for the creature, and she wiggled herself a little closer to Stormfly's warm hide. A delicious, savory smell wafted from the flask as he approached, and she suddenly realized how hungry she felt. She reached out and took the flask without hesitation. Hiccup planted the basket before Stormfly's nose, and the dragon dug into it immediately.

He had cooked Astrid a thick broth, with finely-chopped vegetables, and bits of meat in it, though all still thin enough to drink from a flask. It was filling food, the sort which sat in one's stomach and kept the innards occupied all day long. Astrid had eaten food like it all her life, though there was something different about this particular dishâ€|. A subtle flavour. Warm andâ€| a little minty. It was pleasant, and very different from the bland stews which fueled Berk's population. Even her mother Brunhilda had never managed to work such wonder with a meal. It tastedâ€| luxurious.

Of course Astrid had heard of spices. The Gothi's medicine cabinet doubled as a repository for rare herbs. But Berk's unique situation had forced them to give up such non essentials. Spiced dishes were served at Snoggletog, and other holiday events, as well as banquets for visiting noblemen, but for the general population, just having a meal was something to be thankful for.

She frowned up at him, smacking her lips. "What's that? What did you put in it?"

"Marjoram and Thyme." Hiccup told her. "The word Thyme is derived from Thumos which is Greek for courage. And smoke. But in this case courage is probablyâ€|. He shrugged. "I thought it seemed appropriate given yourâ€| hobbies." He glanced at the tree. Her axe was still buried in it, as were Stormfly's spines.

Astrid took a long swig and let it linger in her mouth, enjoying the taste. When she swallowed, the heat crawled up her spine, all the way into her ears, and down to the tips of her toes. She smiled.

"Thanks."

"No problem. Just kind ofâ€| whipped it up, you know?"

Astrid smiled. "Your dad said you could cook."

"Really? He ahâ€| didn't mention the time when I poisoned both of us, did he?"

Her smile turned to a grin. "No."

"When I was younger I sawâ€| who was it nowâ€|? Old mama Thorston cooking with mushrooms in the great hall." Hiccup had a wry smile on his face, lost in a fond memory. "She put mushrooms in her stew, and I decided to try it at home."

"Oh noâ€|"

"Oh _yes_. Went out and picked a few mushrooms at random from the forest. Came back and dumped them in dad's stew."

"Heh."

"Our statue of Odin would not stop dancing."

Astrid burst out laughing.

"No matter how much I asked it to. It ignored me completely. It was very rude."

"And how—" Astrid bit her lip, shaking her head. She was amazed at how much lighter she felt already. "How was your dad?"

"Oh, looong gone." Hiccup waved his hand. "He had wandered out into the village. Picked a fight with a yak, apparently."

"Oh, Thorâ€|"

"Gobber recognized what was going on. Fed us both some ungodly brew. We spent a half-hour puking into buckets, and then we got better. So there," he shrugged merrily. "Happy ending."

"Happy ending." She raised her flask in salute. "I don't remember anything like that. How old were we?"

"Six or seven? I think you were out training."

"Probably."

"Speaking of training, can I ask you a personal question?"

She shrugged noncommittally.

"Did a tree once eat your siblings?"

Astrid stared at him. Hiccup raised a hand and gestured towards the trunk her axe was lodged in.

"I wasâ€| trainingâ€|"

"And thank the gods you were," he said earnestly, "everyone complains about the dragon infestation, but no one ever talks about Berk's true enemy: the local flora."

She glared at him. "It's easier than dragons."

Hiccup snorted. "Yeah. Trees tend to be all bark, no bite."

"Ugh. Do not make me get my axe."

"You can try, but it's stuck in there pretty good." He eyed her weapon, wedged in the hardwood.

Astrid sighed and looked down at the brown, frost-lined bed of leaves beneath her feet. She rubbed her hands together slowly, feeling the weight and loneliness of her position bearing down on her.

"Astrid?"

"Mmm?"

"Is everything alright?"

Astrid hesitated before answering, but they were the only two people for miles, and she knew she could trust him. After all, they both carried the same weight. She said, "I justâ€| I can't believe how screwed up my life is! I can't do anything right and no one cares that I try. Doesn't matter what you believe. The moment you start thinking outside the box you're not a Viking anymore... I was just trying to help!"

Hiccup leaned casually against a nearby tree trunk, his arms crossed. "Hello fourteen-year-old me. Thought I should warn you, you're going to meet a dragon in a few weeks. And it _won't _try to kill you. It'll be a life-changing moment."

"They took my kids away."

His clownish tone vanished immediately, replaced with honest worry. "Kids?"

"I was training them in the ring. Like Gobber trained us." Astrid told him miserably. "It wasâ€| how I help Berk. I had a place, you know? I had purpose. And theyâ€| they took it away for helping you. Now Snotlout's going to be chief. My kids aren't going to be trained properly. Berk's a mess. We had a plan, you know? Fishlegs and me. It wasn't great, but now you're back, and the ground's shifted. I justâ€| it's allâ€| I dunnoâ€|"

Hiccup slid down the tree until he was sitting at its base, his legs out, mirroring her. He picked up a twig, twirling it idly through his fingers. His expression was sombre, his brows, thick yet fair, furrowed in thought, and his green eyes soft with sympathy. She wondered for a moment if she had offended him. "I don't want you to leave," she added quickly.

"I got you into this," he said.

"I got myself into it."

"It is my fault," he admitted quietly. "I just wanted you to know that I'm really sorry."

"Don't listen to Fishlegs," Astrid replied. "He's a snake."

"He's on our side though, right?"

"I hope so."

He smirked. "â€| Brilliant."

"Hiccup," she prompted. He looked up at her, and as she met his gaze, a warmth flushed through her, comfortable and relaxing. She said, "It's not your fault."

He flashed her a faint, crooked smile, and she could tell he didn't believe her. All the same, he was _thinking. Hard. _She could practically hear the gears turning as he stared down at the twirling

twig.

Suddenly, in mid-spin, it halted. He smirked again, a fire in his eyes as he stared blankly at his own hands. Astrid found herself staring, fascinated by his ferocity. It wasn't the violence, or the blood rage of the regular Berk Vikings, but an entirely different animal altogether. Controlled, cunning and strategic.

He said, "I have a plan."

"Really?" Astrid leaned back into Stormfly's flank and crossed her arms. She wanted she wanted that look, that intensity focused on her. She would never have imagined that gaze coming out of walking fishbone Hiccup Haddock, but this auburn-maned adventurer was a different Viking altogether. Like nothing Berk had ever seen. Like nothing she had ever seen. She found herself wanting to challenge him. To test him. To get him to smirk like that again. "Last time we followed your plan, you ended up dropping me in the middle of the ocean. I'm not going to like this one any better am I?"

"Nope." He grinned mischievously at her. "Not at all."

* * *

><p>Once again I want to extend my appreciation to Midoriko-Sama f**or being an extra pair of eyes on this chapter. Her input helps me bring you all the best product possible so please, go drop her a line, or give her stories a looksee.**

Also, discovered that Word actually saves the changes one makes to a document when you edit it. Apparently FF. net picked up on that and inserted both the edits, and the original text. What a messâ€! thanks for your patience.

End
file.